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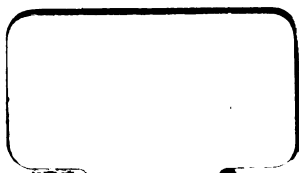
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A LIFE-STRUGGLE.



MISS PARDOE,

AUTHOR OF

"LOUIS XIV. AND THE COURT OF FRANCE IN THE XVIIth CENTURY,"

"LIFE OF FRANCIS I. KING OF FRANCE," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

L. BOOTH, 307 REGENT STREET, W.

MDCCLXIX.

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249. a. 430.

LONDON:
Printed by G. BARCLAY, Castle St. Leicester Sq.



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A LIFE-STRUGGLE.

CHAPTER I.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

ON a bright May morning, and at an hour unusually early for persons of their appearance and deportment, two individuals were seated beneath one of the stately trees in Kensington Gardens. They were both young, and both handsome; and there existed between them a certain resemblance, rather, however, of expression than of complexion or feature, which at once betrayed their relationship. The lady was dark, with fine lustrous eyes, abundant black hair, and a remarkably graceful figure; while her companion, a man of some three or four-and-twenty years of age,

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was, on the contrary, dazzlingly fair, with deep blue eyes, auburn hair curling in heavy masses about his lofty forehead, and the profile of an Antinous. Tall and stately as a young pine, his whole appearance was indicative of high birth, elegance, and that grace of bearing which is only to be attained by contact with the best society. Both brother and sister were, in short, what our continental neighbours designate as "distinguished;" nor did their well-modulated voices dispel the charm of their personal appearance, as, secure from all intrusion upon the privacy of their conversation, they were engaged in earnest discourse.

"Do not waste time in endeavouring to alter my resolution, my dear Ferdinand;" said the lady, in reply to an earnest disclaimer on the part of her brother; "but believe me when I assure you that it is irrevocable. I repeat that I shall never marry. With our slender fortunes, were I selfish enough to do so, you could never hope to provide such a home for your wife as the woman whose hand you ask would have a right to expect, both from your birth and your position in society. Unless, indeed, which I will never

believe"—and her beautiful lip curled for an instant scornfully—"you were to sell yourself to an heiress, and become the pensioner instead of the protector of your life-companion."

"My dear Enna ——" expostulated her brother, as proudly.

"I knew that I was right," pursued Miss Greville; "and the very conviction that you would never consent to place yourself in so false a position induced the determination which I have just announced to you. Do not imagine for a moment that it is a mere sudden caprice, for such is far from being the case. I have weighed the subject maturely and carefully, and I am convinced that my decision is a rational and proper one. You are the last male representative of our family—an impoverished, but not the less a noble one; and you are bound to uphold its dignity and honour. Nor would I have you suppose that I am volunteering a sacrifice, or exhibiting a proof of self-abnegation. By no means. I have never wished to marry—never looked forward to marriage as a necessary consequence of my existence, as women are, I believe, generally prone to do; a fact of which

you must be sufficiently aware, since you have more than once accused me of coldness and even misanthropy, when I was simply indifferent. Your excitable and ardent nature cannot comprehend the calm of mine. To this hour I have never felt what is commonly called love: nay, more, I have not even experienced a preference for one of your sex; and it is very improbable, not to say impossible, that after having passed six-and-twenty years of my life in this comfortable state of tranquillity, I should be weak enough to intrust my happiness to the keeping of another."

"I cannot admit your argument, Enna; nor can I see you, without extreme regret, reject the hand of so unexceptionable a suitor as Augustus Carlyon."

"But if I care nothing for him?" was the quiet rejoinder. "Surely a man like Mr. Carlyon cannot desire to possess the hand of a woman to whom he is an object of utter indifference?"

"Carlyon is two-and-thirty years of age, and has consequently sufficiently outlived his romance by this time, I should imagine, to be satisfied with the esteem and respect of a wife,

without looking for what is understood by love ;” said Greville.

“ A bad beginning, however, I strongly suspect ;” replied his sister ; “ for to this very accommodating principle of

‘ Marry and try,
And you’ll love by and by,’

do I attribute the many miserable matches, —or shall I say the very few happy ones? — that we see about us.”

“ The subject is scarcely one to jest upon under present circumstances, Enna.”

“ Nor do I jest for a moment, my solemn brother ;” said the young lady playfully. “ You know that Lady Maria Marston, my eccentric admirer, has offered me a home during her life, and a comfortable provision after her death, if I will reside with her in Sussex ; and I have resolved to profit by her kindness. I care little for the world, and what the wealthy and the gay esteem as the world, cares still less for me ; therefore, as I said before, I make no sacrifice, and seek only to be happy in your happiness.”

“ And should you one day discover that you have deceived yourself?”

"I have no fear of making such a discovery. You are to me father, mother, brother, friend—*all*, in short; and I long to feel as a hidden spectator gazing from her obscure nook upon the wide and brilliantly-decorated stage whereon 'lives and moves' the one idol of her imagination and her heart; the observed of all observers. You were born for success, Ferdinand; personally and mentally you may boast of every quality calculated to secure it; how could I submit to be a clog upon your fortunes? I should hate myself did I deem it possible."

"Always the same old story, Enna;" said her brother affectionately, though not without a shade of vexation in his tone and manner; "To hear you, one would imagine that I stood alone in the universe, as a sort of Admirable Crichton. It is really a pity, my good sister, that our relationship is so close, and that I am debarred the privilege of compelling you, as I might have done had we been simply cousins, to abnegate all your magnificent anti-matrimonial resolutions. Assuredly, if all women thought as you do, I should be, if not the happiest, at any rate the most favoured of mortals; but unfortunately, Enna, you

judge too partially. I have many faults, but not yet, I trust, the contemptible one with which you are seeking to inoculate me, for I am not fop enough to believe that I possess half the good qualities with which you seek to invest me. Am I then really to disappoint the hopes of poor Carlyon?"

"Oh, do not make yourself uneasy with regard to your friend. He will soon find consolation elsewhere;" said Miss Greville, with a light laugh.

"Nevertheless, I consent to do your bidding with great reluctance;" was the reply; "nor can I approve the resolution which you have taken to bury the best years of your life in the dull home of a confirmed invalid. It is mistaken and unnatural."

"I am your elder sister, sir, and you should show more respect for my opinions;" whispered the lady, as she wound her arm fondly about his neck.

"I cannot, of course, oppose so important an authority as your eighteen months of eldership enable you to assume;" smiled her brother in his turn; "but remember, Emma, that your claim upon the estate, such as it is, must, and will, always remain intact,

in spite of all the wild and unreasonable whims which you may engender in your foolish brain. Come what may, you will ever be my own dear sister, and my greatest interest in this world. No unkind word, no unkind look, has ever yet passed between us; and were it not for the strange caprice that has taken possession of you, scarcely a difference of opinion."

And Ferdinand Greville said truly; the two had been everything to each other; one heart and one will had governed all their actions; and although they were, at the period when we have introduced them to the reader, by no means in the social or pecuniary position to which they were entitled by their birth, they had never repined, for their mutual affection sufficed to their happiness. It was only to the future that they looked with any anxiety.

Lady Charlotte Greville had died of rapid decline a few years after the birth of Ferdinand; and his father, who was aide-de-camp to the Earl of Ravenswood, had left Enna under the care of one of his own relatives, and placed Ferdinand at a preparatory school selected by his patron, while he accompanied

the latter to the Peninsula, where he served throughout the whole campaign. Unhappily, the handsome and fascinating Captain Greville soon recovered the loss of his amiable and talented wife, who had been enabled, by her judicious counsels and devoted affection, to restrain his natural passion for dissipation and expense; and he no sooner found himself once more free from all family ties, than he plunged into the wildest and most deplorable excesses, which he endeavoured to repair at the gaming-table; where he eventually lost such large sums of money, that on the return of the army to England, he was compelled to dispose of his commission and to expatriate himself, in order to escape the pursuit of his creditors.

His destination was America, where he fondly hoped to retrieve his shattered fortunes; and adversity having restored to him some of the better feelings of his nature, he resolved to establish a home in the country of his adoption before he exposed his motherless children to the hardships which they must otherwise have shared; a determination which was strengthened by the approbation of Lord Ravenswood, to whom the gallantry

and devotion of his young aide-de-camp had greatly endeared him; and who, while he mourned his follies, could not forget that he was indebted to him for his life at the siege of Badajoz, where he had boldly flung himself between his general and an officer of French lancers, and received the wound destined for his chief.

“Do not fear for your future fortunes, my dear Greville;” had been the parting words of the grateful Lord Ravenswood, as he wrung the hand of the voluntary exile; “only be just to yourself, and you may yet become an honour to your country and to your name. Have no home-anxieties, but trust to me. Go, and endeavour to repair your past imprudence: you have sinned against no one but yourself; you have never forfeited your honour; and you are still young enough to create a prosperous future. Were I a rich man we would not part thus, but you are well aware that such is not the case; therefore, professions on this subject would be idle.”

And after a last interview with Ferdinand and Enna, the unhappy father, cheered by this assurance, sobered by experience, and

hopeful of brighter days, bade adieu to England.

The vessel in which he embarked was lost, with all hands on board, upon the passage.

The orphans were too young to comprehend their loss. To them the fatal event which had occurred involved no more than Enna's removal from the somewhat austere rule of a maiden grand-aunt, proud of her pedigree, and scandalised by the conduct of their father, to the guardianship of Lord Ravenswood, to whom she was gladly resigned; and that of Ferdinand from a circle of boisterous, mischief-loving urchins, to the companionship of his sister and the gentle control of a matronly governess, to whose care they were entrusted until Enna was removed to a first-class seminary, and Ferdinand entered at Eton, whence he was ultimately transferred to Cambridge, where he distinguished himself so greatly as to flatter the pride, and secure the enduring affection of his noble patron.

On the completion of Ferdinand's college career Lord Ravenswood had reached his fiftieth year; and although generally respected

and esteemed, he was, as he had himself declared, very far from wealthy. His extensive estates had come to him heavily mortgaged ; and regarding rather the honour of his name than his own personal gratification, he had assiduously endeavoured, since his accession to the title, to diminish their incumbrances. His establishment was consequently by no means commensurate with his rank ; but as he had little taste for ostentation, and that his habits were extremely simple, he contrived to support his dignity even while decreasing his liabilities ; and if he did at times experience a regret that his means were thus trammelled, it was only because he was unable to do all the good for others to which his warm heart would have prompted him.

True to his system of economy, the Earl had no town residence, but had, for several seasons, occupied a furnished house belonging to a widow lady of great wealth, who, with her only daughter, were his near neighbours. As the husband of Mrs. Heathcote had acquired his large fortune in commerce, she, with a delicate sense of self-respect, forbore to force her acquaintance upon her noble tenant, although it may be admitted that she

greatly coveted the friendship of the elegant and accomplished Enna for her beautiful Laura, whose education had been completed under her own watchful care, and who she knew to be well worthy of such companionship.

Mrs. Heathcote had married very early in life, and had only completed her thirty-sixth year when we introduce her to our readers, while her daughter had just celebrated her sixteenth birthday. Guido would have loved to paint Laura Heathcote, her beauty was so fair, so pure, and so angel-like: eyes as blue as heaven, hair just touched with a golden tint, which enhanced the dazzling clearness of her complexion; a form tall and finely-proportioned, which gave promise of still greater perfection in maturity, and graceful and supple as that of a young fawn; a manner winning at once, from its calm gentleness and its retiring modesty; all combined to render the fair girl the idol of her mother's heart. Numerous had been the attempts made to induce Mrs. Heathcote to contract a second marriage, but they had signally failed, for all her happiness centered in her child; and although still handsome and attractive, she overlooked her own personal advantages in those of Laura.

The near neighbourhood of the two houses had, as a necessary consequence, made the family of Lord Ravenswood and that of Mrs. Heathcote acquainted by sight, though no communication had as yet taken place between them; but, nevertheless, Ferdinand Greville had contrived to convince himself that his whole heart was in the keeping of the lovely young heiress; while the fair Laura, on her side, had occasionally heaved a sigh as she suffered her eyes to linger upon the manly figure and handsome face of the Earl's adopted son. If, however, the young lady were unconscious of the feeling which she was thus tacitly encouraging, such was, as we have shown, by no means the case with the young gentleman; and he would not so long have delayed declaring his passion had he not remembered that Miss Heathcote was one of the richest heiresses in England, while he was comparatively a very poor man, without either profession or expectations. Under these circumstances he was well aware, that, although well born, he was by no means, in a worldly point of view, an eligible match for the object of his admiration.

In our gold-worshipping country, where

poverty is not only a misfortune but a crime, the aristocracy of money is not less exacting than that of rank; wealth, as a general rule, commands a title as stringently as high birth assumes to itself the privilege of purchasing fortune; and Ferdinand could not blind himself to the fact, that the slender patrimony and untitled name which he had inherited from a profligate father, had invested him with no right to aspire to the hand of one so gifted by fortune as Miss Heathcote. How often did he not curse the chance which had raised up this barrier between them, and persuade himself that, had she been poor, they might have lived, if not luxuriously, at least contentedly and happily, upon his modest income! And then he might have obtained the permission of Lord Ravenswood, hitherto singularly withheld, to study a profession, he cared not what or which, whereby he should have it in his power to increase its amount. To the young and sanguine nothing appears difficult, nothing impossible; and accordingly Ferdinand Greville would have accepted with equal readiness a prospect of the pulpit, the bar, or the gold-headed cane, had he only seen the angelic face of Laura in the far perspective.

All these were dreams, however; and, dream as he might, he could not separate Mr. Heathcote's daughter from his ducats. He had, consequently, only to forget her, and this he magnanimously resolved to do. Reason is an admirable thing, no doubt; and the world would be much wiser than it is were it always submissive to its rule: whether it would be happier in the aggregate, it were difficult to say. There are so many flowers on this fair earth which require sunshine to bring out their tints, that it may be doubted whether some of the best and noblest feelings of the human heart could be elicited were the natural impulses to be weighed and measured, crushed and calculated, at all times. Be this as it may, however, it is at least certain that the grey-beard Reason is no match for the boy-god Love; and thus the doughty resolution of the enamoured Greville required only a very slight temptation to crumble into nothingness.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST INTERVIEW.

A ROYAL marriage was about to take place in St. James's Chapel, which Mrs. Heathcote was anxious to witness; and after much hesitation, and many entreaties from her daughter, she at length determined upon requesting Lord Ravenswood to procure tickets for herself and Laura.

"There can be, I think, no impropriety in asking this favour, my dear girl;" she said fondly; "as the Earl is quite aware that we shall never presume upon his kindness. I will therefore venture to intrude upon him for once, for this is an extreme case, and I feel sure that he will hold me excused."

And Mrs. Heathcote was right; for Lord Ravenswood, with his usual amiability, was so happy to have it in his power to give pleasure, that he really felt himself to be the obliged

person ; and he therefore desired Ferdinand, who since his return from Cambridge had acted as his private secretary, to deliver the tickets in person, and to express to the lady the gratification which he experienced in complying with her wishes.

Ferdinand felt for an instant as though he were spell-bound ; nor could he decide whether the emotion which oppressed him were one of pleasure or of pain. He had never yet crossed the threshold of Mrs. Heathcote, and he dreaded the effect which might be produced on him on finding himself in the midst of the objects by which Laura was daily and hourly surrounded ; above all, he dreaded that his countenance might betray the feelings which he was only too conscious that he had not yet overcome. There was, however, no alternative ; for what possible reason could he advance for refusing to obey the very simple request of his benefactor ? Go he must ; and accordingly, after having seized his hat, glanced somewhat anxiously in the chimney-glass, and taken the envelope containing the tickets from the table, he set forth to execute his commission ; almost hoping that, as the day was so far advanced, the ladies

might be absent on their daily drive in the Park. Almost convinced that such would be the case he rang the door-bell, when in answer to his inquiry he was informed that Mrs. Heathcote was from home, and he was about to leave the packet with the servant, but while he was delivering the message of Lord Ravenswood, he caught a glimpse of the figure of Laura, as she was disappearing through the door of the library.

"Can I see Miss Heathcote?" he asked, unable to resist the temptation thus suddenly presented to him.

"I will inquire if my young lady can receive you, sir, if you will oblige me with your name," said the man civilly.

In the next instant the card of Greville was in his hand, and in a few more the visitor found himself in the presence of the blushing and fluttered Laura, who, on seeing Ferdinand under her mother's roof for the first time, and during that mother's absence, could not sufficiently control her agitation to receive him with her usual grace and self-possession—a fact of which she was so painfully aware, that her very efforts to conceal her confusion only rendered it the more apparent. The emotion

of Miss Heathcote restored the composure of Greville, who proceeded to express to her the pleasure with which Lord Ravenswood begged Mrs. Heathcote's acceptance of the desired tickets; an assurance for which Laura murmured her rather incoherent acknowledgments, coupled with an assurance of the regret which her mother would feel at having lost the opportunity of thanking him herself. She then motioned him to a chair, but she did so with such evident constraint, that he resisted his first impulse to profit by so un-hoped-for an opportunity of conversing with her, unimpeded by the presence of a third person; and pleading an imperative appointment, hastened to withdraw.

But even this brief interview had sufficed to scatter all his prudent resolutions to the wind. He had listened to the low, soft, musical voice of Laura; he had seen her lovely features glowing with the bright blush which his own appearance had called up, and which, as he intuitively felt, had betrayed the secret of her heart; and a delicious conviction that, although they had just met for the first time, he was not altogether indifferent to her, stole over him. He forgot alike her wealth and

his own comparative poverty; he forgot the pride which had hitherto taught him to shrink from all possible obligation to the woman whom he loved; and he remembered only her grace, her beauty, and her sweetness, as he asked himself why he should wilfully fling from him the greatest blessing that life could offer to his acceptance? Would it be the first time, he mentally argued, that two beings formed for each other, asserted their right to secure their own happiness? Is there anything to prevent my opening up for myself an honourable and lucrative career in diplomacy under the patronage of the Earl, who would appear, from his having tacitly appointed me his private secretary, to have had this very end in view? Why, then, should I shrink from doing justice to myself, when I may, at no very distant day, be enabled to place her in a position worthy of her? Surely, if she really loves me, or may be brought to do so, it were mere madness to blight my whole existence from a false principle of pride.

Such is human nature, ever beset by weakness and irresolution: at one moment scrupulous, fearful, and undecided; in the next, self-relying, confident, and uncalcu-

lating; unjust in its distrust; presumptuous in its hopes; as easily discouraged as self-deluded; and almost always ready to sacrifice to its own desires its convictions, and even its conscience.

But different, far different, were the sensations of Laura, when she once more found herself alone after the abrupt departure of Greville. The illusion by which her whole existence had been tremblingly gladdened for the last few months had been dispelled in less than as many moments. To her, Ferdinand had appeared cold, constrained, and haughty. She had, or she believed that she had, detected in his very look, as well as in the tones of his voice, an assumption of superiority, which wounded even more than it angered her; and which had put to flight a host of pleasant fancies, in which she had hitherto almost unconsciously indulged, as to what *might* have been, had some happy accident brought them together. He had been loftily courteous, it was true, but that was all; and he had hurried from her presence as though the necessity which impelled him there were distasteful to him, and that he cared not to conceal that such was the case.

It was the first struggle of a young, pure heart; and although the worldly-wise may incline to sneer at it, it was none the less a bitter one: nor was this bitterness diminished by the consciousness that she had herself betrayed more emotion than so simple an occurrence as his visit to her mother ought to have elicited. Judging by herself, therefore, she could only arrive at one of two conclusions—either that she was an object of perfect indifference to him, or that he possessed an amount of self-control which augured ill for the delicacy of his sentiments and the goodness of his heart.

Both were wrong. Ferdinand had suffered his egotism to mislead him; and Laura judged by her own failure in self-command of the moral strength of another, with whose innate nature she was utterly unacquainted.

CHAPTER III.

THE LETTER.

GREVILLE did not immediately return home, but kept the alleged appointment with himself under a spreading oak near the Home Farm, where he knew that he should at that hour be free from interruption; and the more he reflected upon his interview with Miss Heathcote, the more he almost suffered himself to believe that his union with the beautiful heiress was by no means so impossible as he had once taught himself to believe. Yet tormenting doubts assailed him nevertheless. Hitherto their eyes had only met in church, or in a casual encounter in the street, as he involuntarily reined up his horse when passing the well-appointed equipage of Mrs. Heathcote, and it might be that the lovely Laura was still too new to society to meet a perfect stranger with the graceful composure which

he had accustomed himself to attribute to her ; but the innate vanity of his sex and age combated this suspicion so resolutely, that in spite of himself the hope which he sought, or fancied that he sought to banish, returned upon him, and he eagerly anticipated the moment when he might convince himself that he was really loved by the only woman whose affection he had ever cared to win.

But how was this to be accomplished ? He had himself, by his own abruptness, terminated every chance of all further communication with the Heathcote family ; for in vain did he strive to hope that Mrs. Heathcote would construe the crude fact of his having been the bearer of Lord Ravenswood's message into an opening of acquaintanceship : her past reserve forbade such a thought for an instant ; while it seemed equally certain that the report which her daughter would be enabled to make of his bearing on that occasion would be peculiarly ill-fitted to encourage her in the project, even had she been inclined to form it.

What was to be done ?

Two hours went by. He was still as perplexed and undecided as ever ; and even more hopelessly convinced than when he left

Grosvenor Street, that he could not long endure the state of uncertainty for which he was in a great degree indebted to his own folly. How could such an opportunity ever occur again? It appeared simply impossible; and he had now consequently no other method of making known his love to Laura than in writing. But how was his letter to be conveyed to her? How would it be received? And how, should he really have suffered himself to be deluded by his own hopes and wishes, would she not resent what, in such a case, she could only consider as an impertinence? The more these objections and difficulties presented themselves, however, the more resolute he became to carry out his purpose. The soft, timid voice was still vibrating in his ears like the last, low, trembling tones of an Eolian harp; the long lashes of the downcast eyelids still seemed to veil, without obscuring, the rich light of the deep, love-beaming blue eyes; there was, in short, madness in the thought that he might lose her through his own want of energy and manliness; and as he sprang up from his recumbent position, and made his way towards the Grosvenor Gate, he determined to repair

his fault at once, and to trust to his stars (the lucky ones, of course) for the means of conveying his letter.

True to his purpose, he had no sooner arrived at home than sweeping from his desk a mass of applications from tenants for reductions in their rents, complaints from game-keepers of the incursions of poachers, and similarly interesting documents, he drew forth a quire of cream-laid note paper, and forthwith poured out upon it all the hidden feelings of his soul. He was at once tender and respectful; he admitted the presumption of which he was guilty; but he nevertheless pleaded the cause of his passion so earnestly and so energetically that he felt convinced he should be forgiven. "Even if she loves me not;" he murmured to himself; "she cannot surely be so cold-hearted as to resent the fact of my loving her! What woman could be utterly insensible to a devotion so sincere as mine?" And so the letter was folded in its envelope, and secured by a seal,—not one of those sickly, and now (fortunately) almost obsolete devices which were permitted by the last generation, on similar contingencies, to reveal the nature of the epistle to which they were attached,

but the simple crest of his family, surrounded by a garter bearing the sufficiently significant motto, *Per sempre*. On this occasion no better legend could have been devised.

So far all had been comparatively easy; but the letter once written, the important question obtruded itself, of—How was it to reach the hands of the fair being to whom it was addressed? And this question was one by no means easily answered. To intrust its delivery to a menial was a proceeding repugnant to the delicacy of Greville, and one which must compromise the dignity of Miss Heathcote; the post was not to be thought of for an instant, as the precious missive upon which all his future hopes of happiness were based, might fall into the hands of her mother. Could he only give it to her himself! But how? Where and when would the opportunity present itself? And how could he be sure that, even if he possessed that opportunity, she would not refuse to receive it?

These were very unpleasant reflections; and for the present the discomfited and disheartened Ferdinand could only deposit the precious document in his pocket-book, and endeavour to hope almost against hope.

As Lord Ravenswood had expressed his wish that Enna and her brother should be present at the august ceremony of the royal marriage, Greville had no alternative but to obey; and having handed his sister to her seat, he left the chapel in the vague hope of obtaining a passing glance at Miss Heathcote. Nor was he disappointed, for he had scarcely had time to exchange salutations with half a dozen of his friends, who were, like himself, watching the arrival of the company, when he caught sight of the well-known carriage of Mrs. Heathcote, and hastened to offer his arm to her as she alighted; an attention by which she was evidently much gratified. As he conducted her to the places assigned for herself and her daughter—by whom she was closely followed—Laura suddenly remembered that she had left her prayer-book in the carriage, and he had no sooner seen his fair charges in possession of their seats, than he hastened, amid many apologies from both ladies, in search of it. Nothing, as he reflected at the moment, could have happened more fortunately; and he was no sooner in possession of the velvet-covered, golden-clasped volume, than his carefully-hoarded letter was

deposited between its pages, and ere long, whether it were that the beautiful owner of the book was ignorant of the nature of the communication which had been thus surreptitiously introduced where assuredly no letter of the kind should ever have intruded, or that some vague suspicion of the truth stole over the heart of the conscious recipient, certain it is that ere many minutes had elapsed, the little envelope with its precious contents was cleverly removed from the book, and concealed amid the cobweb folds of the handkerchief which she carried in her hand.

Ferdinand, who had never for an instant lost sight of her after his return to the chapel, felt his heart bound as he detected the movement; and satisfied that he had now secured an opportunity of pleading his own cause, he quietly established himself beside his sister.

"But, even when my letter is in her hands;" he asked himself, a moment afterwards; "how can I be sure that she will read it? And yet, I think she will; for I could detect no displeasure on her sweet face as she concealed it, although my proceeding is most certainly unjustifiable. Neither the means nor the place were such as I should have

rendered subservient to my own selfish passion. Why was I so rash—so blinded to every sense of propriety? Why had I not more control over myself? I have acted unworthily, and I deserve that she should despise and spurn me. What if she were to doubt the purity and sincerity of my passion, and to attribute to me the interested motives to which such a proceeding may lay me open to suspicion—shall I not have lost her for ever, and lost her through my own imprudence? But it is vain to argue with my fears; it is too late to repent my precipitancy; and had I not incurred this risk, and preferred to follow the beaten track to which custom and the usages of society would have compelled me, should I not have exposed myself to a more formal repulse? Had I asked her hand of her mother, should I not have incurred the mortification of finding myself reduced to the necessity of admitting that I was poor, and of being regarded as a needy fortune-hunter? Of this there can be no doubt; but still this does not extenuate my fault.”

And meanwhile the brilliant pageant passed before him unheeded; the solemn tones of the organ and the melodious voices of the

choristers were alike unheard; and he was only aroused from his reverie by the movement occasioned by the termination of the ceremony, and the departure of the glittering groups by whom it had been witnessed.

Blame himself as he might, however, it is certain that Greville nevertheless felt more light of heart than he had done since his interview with Laura in Grosvenor Street; and although there were still moments in which he believed that he had wrecked his own hopes, and was indignant at his own presumption, there were others in which he acquitted himself of all blame, and indulged in the wildest visions of happiness and success. Conscious of the disinterestedness and truth of his attachment, he felt as though it were impossible that it should be either misinterpreted or despised; and thus, alternating between hope and fear, he awaited the result of his somewhat hazardous experiment.

CHAPTER IV.

FAMILY CONNEXIONS.

WE are obliged to confess that Laura read the letter. She felt that it was wrong to do so, and that she ought either to have sent it back (for she was at no loss to understand that no hand, save that of Mr. Greville, could have placed it where it was found), or have immediately carried it to her mother; but then, in either case, she would probably have remained in ignorance till Doomsday of the nature of its contents; and her philosophy was not proof against such a trial. How she turned it over and over in her little white hands before she broke the seal! How pretty the name of Heathcote, upon which she had never hitherto bestowed a thought, looked in the fine manly characters in which it was written on the address! And what a pleasant

mystery there was in the manner in which it had come into her possession ! In fact, she examined it much as Pandora may have been supposed to examine the magic box which was destined to reveal to her the great secret of human existence, and with quite as earnest a desire to make herself mistress of the mystery. At length it lay open before her, and a rapid glance at once convinced her that she had altogether mistaken the sentiments of Ferdinand. No ! she was not an object of indifference to him. No ! happy and self-reconciling thought ! she had not taught herself to love one by whom her love was disregarded. No one who read that letter could doubt the depth, the fervency of Greville's attachment. Young to life, and knowing nothing of its trials and disappointments, the ingenuous girl saw no obstacles before her, no impediments to the success of a marriage which she felt, or believed, would render her the most enviable of her sex ; she gave herself up, in short, to one of those blessed visions which can only be enjoyed in early youth, ere the world and its cold, stern exigences have taught our hearts that the privilege of joy involves also the necessity of suffering.

“Of course;” she said to herself, with a certain dignity derived from the new-born consciousness of being beloved; “he will now propose for me to mamma; and I must endeavour to appear very much surprised when she makes me acquainted with the fact. I hope he will not be long before he makes up his mind to do it. I am sure that he need not fear her displeasure, for she is so kind, so indulgent, and so anxious to secure my happiness, that when she sees how perfectly satisfied I am to accept him as my husband, she will not raise any unnecessary obstacles to our union. Dear Ferdinand! Who could resist such a letter? How beautifully he expresses his sentiments! how unaffectedly he pours forth his heart! and how singular that he should have loved me from the first time that I found myself dreaming of *him*, and believing that the woman who gained his affections must be the most happy creature upon earth!” And then, having fully satisfied herself on that point, she re-read the letter, and pondered over every sentence as though she were endeavouring to solve some difficult enigma. She analysed each expression; pondered over each phrase which might, as she fancied, admit of a double

solution ; and bewildered herself in the attempt to give it that which she supposed to have been the meaning of the writer. But who does not remember the rapture of lingering over the first love-letter? A woman who loves is as slow in finishing her task as a child in studying its alphabet.

Laura was well aware that more than one proposal had already been made for her hand, although they had all been declined by her mother, without even a reference to herself ; nor had Mrs. Heathcote given any other reason for her decision upon the subject than her firm determination that her daughter should not marry before she had completed her eighteenth year. It is, therefore, scarcely necessary to say that these several suitors were by no means discouraged, but rather waited patiently until the stipulated period, ready once more to enter the list when the fair heiress should be more approachable. Riches and beauty combined were by no means to be lightly lost.

Like a prudent woman, Mrs. Heathcote did not care to explain to the marrying young men of her set that she had arrived at a resolution respecting the establishment of her

daughter, which rendered them, one and all, ineligible. The description of husband that she desired for her precious Laura had not yet presented himself; nor, to tell the truth, had she sought for him: she was too rational, and had, moreover, too great a regard for her child's dignity to do so; but she had also a firm will, and a full conviction that what she had once really willed would be accomplished.

That riches do not make happiness, is an apophthegm as true as it is trite; and Mrs. Heathcote, enormously wealthy as she was, afforded an example of that truth. There was "a skeleton in the closet" beneath her roof, as there is beneath many others—one of those canker-worms in her bosom which frequently gnaw away the sweetness of prosperity, as noxious insects prey upon the finest fruits. In the case of Mrs. Heathcote, the canker-worm was wounded vanity—a feeling that neutralized all the gratification which she might otherwise have derived from a consciousness that she was in possession of all the best gifts of fortune; and, unhappily, this feeling had been awakened by one to whom she was closely knit by relationship, if not by affection.

The elder sister of Mrs. Heathcote had become the wife of a baronet. He was old enough to be her father, certainly; but, pretty and attractive as she was, she could not resist the charm of the "bloody hand," although it had been gloved for nearly fifty years: and from the period of her marriage Lady Willoughby had overwhelmed her untitled sister with mortification and sarcasm. When occasionally reminded of the princely wealth of the merchant's widow, she universally responded by the one word, "Trade!" and changed the subject, as though she felt herself contaminated by the connexion.

The ungenerous disdain of her sister had not long been suffered to remain unknown to Mrs. Heathcote. The gossips of her circle—and where are there not gossips to be found?—were only too well pleased to remind her of the origin of the riches which they envied, at the same time that they convinced her of their own regard by animadverting on the ill-nature of Lady Willoughby. For a considerable time Mrs. Heathcote had refused to give credence to what she conceived to be mere idle tales; nor was it until she found herself compelled to believe in their truth that she suffered herself to be annoyed and irritated by the

superciliousness of her sister; and even then she would not permit any one to perceive how keenly she felt the indignity to which she was subjected. Above all, she resolved never to betray the fact to Lady Willoughby; who, before her marriage, had acted towards her like a second mother. Consequently there was no quarrel between the sisters, although all sympathy was at an end; and that Mrs. Heathcote deeply resented the unkindness of her relative, while she calmly awaited her revenge. She felt that the means of securing that revenge were within her reach; and as it was her self-love which had been stung, so she resolved that she would in her turn sting that of her exulting and disdainful persecutor.

The Willoughby family consisted of the baronet, his wife, and their idolized son Arthur, whom they had in vain striven to inoculate with their heraldic prejudices. Loathing the trammels of etiquette, and enjoying life whenever its pleasures were offered to his acceptance, he could not, or would not, understand that a score of dead ancestors, or a proud name, should prove an equivalent for the more tangible gratification of social indulgences.

As his stately parents always passed the season in town, Arthur was enabled to see a great deal of his aunt and cousin, and availed himself very frequently of such pretexts as he could find, or invent, to escape from the tedious and heavy dinners of the baronet, in order to join the little party in Grosvenor Street. Fortunately he was not a man of strong feelings, though he had soon discovered that Laura was very pretty and very lovable; nor was he by any means insensible to the fact, that her yearly thousands would make a welcome addition to his own somewhat circumscribed income: but, as he shrewdly suspected that Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby would never consent to his becoming the son-in-law of a merchant, he wisely forbore to ask the hand of his cousin, made himself as happy as could be expected under the circumstances, and trusted to time to accomplish for him what he was afraid to undertake for himself.

In short, if Ferdinand Greville yearned after the romance of life, Arthur Willoughby clung to its realities; and never were two men of the same age so totally opposed in tastes and character. More than once our

hero—for we may as well confess, without further reservation, that Ferdinand Greville is our hero—more than once had he watched, with a throbbing pulse and a flashing eye, the exits and entrances of his presumed rival through the well-known door which was closed against himself; and marvelled how Laura met and parted from the bright-eyed unknown, who was for months at a time so assiduous in his visits.

Poor Laura! Could he have looked into her heart, he might have spared himself all further speculation; for she had unconsciously fallen into the very reprehensible habit of comparing the two together, and of wondering whether, should she ever, by some extraordinary chance, make the acquaintance of Mr. Greville, she should find him as frivolous and as self-satisfied as her cousin. As for loving Arthur, the idea never for an instant entered her mind: he amused her, and she was grateful for the little attentions which it appeared to afford him pleasure to pay her: but love does not build up its abiding-place upon so flimsy and paltry a foundation as this! It must have more solid materials to work upon. If the miser hides his gold,

so does a sincere worshipper of the blind god conceal his best and most fervent aspirations ; when they are broad-cast like grain, rank weeds spring up among them, and they lose their value to the reaper. One look from Ferdinand—and by some chance Laura had encountered more than one, long before the sound of Mr. Greville's voice had fallen upon her ear—was more precious to her, strive to conceal it from herself as she might, than all the courtesies of her cousin. If, therefore, such was the case previous to the visit of Ferdinand, how did the spell deepen after that visit ! And yet Miss Heathcote would have been sorely puzzled to explain why it should be so, for assuredly a more unpromising interview had never taken place than that in which Laura had contrived to appear absolutely awkward, and Lord Ravenswood's envoy had seemed to have no anxiety so great as that of escaping from her presence.

Thus it was, however ; and it was only a week or two after the royal marriage, to which we have already alluded, that as they sat together at a *tête-à-tête* breakfast, Mrs. Heathcote, looking affectionately at her daughter, inquired if she had lately remembered

that the ninth of the following month would be her birthday, and that on that occasion she would have attained the dignified age of seventeen?

"No, indeed, my dear mamma; strange to say, I had quite forgotten it;" said Laura, with a smile, which was somewhat unnaturally succeeded by a sigh: "but so it is, indeed. Why, I am becoming quite a matronly personage!"

"And how can I give you the greatest pleasure on this important anniversary, my beloved child?" asked the fond mother. "You know I shall not refuse any reasonable request that you may make; and as I have never yet found you exorbitant in your demands on my indulgence, I scarcely think that you need apprehend any disappointment on the present occasion."

"You know, dear mamma, that you promised me a ball."

"I did, darling: but that will scarcely be a novelty; we have had three, if I do not mistake, within the last two years."

"That is quite true;" assented Miss Heathcote; and then, for some reason or other, which she evidently did not consider

it necessary to explain, she again sighed, and added a great deal more sugar to her coffee than it could possibly require; "But you must not think me ungrateful if I confess that, although I certainly enjoyed myself very much, and danced a great deal at those three balls, and that they were very nice, and that every one said they were charming, and all that kind of thing, I feel as if I did not care half so much for this one that you are now going to give."

"Why, what a capricious little being you must be, Laura! You, who have so often declared that there was nothing in the world you loved so much as dancing!"

"*Liked*, dear mamma, not *loved*;" was the odd rejoinder: "to love, it strikes me that one must look for something like a response to the feeling. For example," she continued, as a vivid blush rose to her cheek; "I love *you*, because I know that my affection is returned; but a mere amusement! Surely one ought not to waste one's best feelings upon anything so purely selfish and so very transitory? There! don't laugh at me;" she pursued, as she caught her mother's eye; "for I know that I am talking nonsense;

but, to tell you the truth, I long for a little novelty. I have seen the same faces over and over till I have learnt them by heart."

"Nonsense, indeed, dear child! Why, my list of invitations already extends to four hundred, and you must have a most extraordinary memory if you can recall them all!" said Mrs. Heathcote quietly.

"But when one knows that they have been here as a matter of course, whenever you have received your friends, mamma, one feels as though one had a certain right to be weary of them; and you see that I am very perversely inclined to avail myself of the privilege."

The mother looked grave; and then, after a moment's silence, remarked:—

"You are well aware, my love, that it is by no means easy to acquire new acquaintance in London which may appear perfectly unexceptionable. Now I confess to you, Laura, that I should be as well pleased as yourself to succeed in doing this, and numbering a few among my guests upon whom your aunt might find it somewhat more difficult to lavish her sarcasms than she does upon the perfectly respectable, but still untitled, clique to which

we have hitherto been confined. I have, indeed, several very important reasons for wishing that this could be effected, but I do not really see how, at this particular moment, it can be done."

"It strikes me, *madre mia*;" replied her daughter, as she amused herself by making a sort of Chinese puzzle with the crusts of her dry toast; "that as Lord Ravenswood was polite enough to leave his card at your door in acknowledgment of your note thanking him for the tickets he procured for us, and as he is also your tenant, there would be nothing at all strange, or—or—you know what I mean, of course—in sending cards to him and his nephew and niece. I should so very much like to make a friend of Miss Greville."

"And of all things in the world that is the one which I desire the most;" said her mother with a slightly flurried manner; "but I fear that I am scarcely justified in taking such a liberty. You are aware, Laura, that I am very careful never to intrude my acquaintance on any one; and it might seem ——"

"What *could* it seem, my dear mamma;" interposed the younger lady anxiously; "ex-

cept that you wished to show a proper courtesy to the Earl? who, you must remember, is quite at liberty to decline the invitation; when, of course, it would never be repeated."

"But the refusal would wound me deeply, Laura."

"I do not think," was the rejoinder of the persevering young beauty; "that you need apprehend a refusal. We have no title, it is true; but how many untitled persons, with no more claim than ourselves, are intimate with the nobility? Be persuaded, mother dear, and let me have that invitation-card for my *bouquet de fête*."

Mrs. Heathcote still hesitated, but she could not long resist the pleading look of her daughter; and it was consequently decided, before they rose from the breakfast-table, that the important invitation should be forthwith despatched.

The fingers of the fair Laura trembled a little as she inserted the names upon the card, and delivered it to the footman; and it may be doubted whether she would so pertinaciously have followed up her purpose had Lord Ravenswood been the sole tenant of her mother's house.

Within an hour a servant, in the Earl's livery, left a letter at the door, in which the invitation of Mrs. Heathcote was courteously acknowledged and accepted; and in the course of the morning Arthur Willoughby dropped in, as usual, to inquire for his aunt and cousin; when he was entrusted with another card, addressed to Sir Marmaduke and his mother, accompanied by a verbal request that he would consider himself engaged to accompany them without a more formal bidding, as, "with the exception of the Earl of Ravenswood and Mr. and Miss Greville, who had already promised her the pleasure of their company," Mrs. Heathcote had as yet issued no other invitations.

With a somewhat startled bow the young man expressed his thanks, and the gratification he should feel in celebrating the birthday of his cousin in so agreeable a manner; and, satisfied that in giving the card to his mother he would be certain to mention to her the fact of Lord Ravenswood's intended presence at the ball, Mrs. Heathcote already experienced a foretaste of the triumph which awaited her. And Arthur did mention it; but Lady Willoughby received the intelligence in a manner

that would have stung her sister to the quick, had she been present. The worthy lady coloured slightly, it is true, and for an instant looked excessively annoyed; but she rallied at once, and flinging down her own invitation upon her work-table with a bitter sneer, said, sarcastically:—

“How easily poor Arabella is duped! What a pity she should expose herself by announcing that the Earl will appear in her rooms, when she may rely on it that he will be attacked by gout on the morning of that precise day, and that the two Grevilles will be obliged to remain at home to nurse him. She really ought to have more sense!”

CHAPTER V.

THE BIRTHDAY-BALL.

MRS. HEATHCOTE, meanwhile, enchanted at the success of her preliminary arrangements, resolved that she would at the forthcoming ball excel all her former efforts; and as money works marvels, particularly in London, she found, as the various preparations progressed, that there was little risk of failure. Her really splendid drawing-rooms were resplendent with glass and gilding; and when the eventful evening at length arrived, and that a brilliant flood of light illuminated the whole suite, the *coup d'œil* was most enchanting. Exotic plants, gorgeous with blossoms and rich with perfume, lined the hall and staircase; the orchestra consisted of the most talented musicians to be obtained; and as she walked for the last time through the fairy-scene which the golden rod of Plutus had

conjured up, ere she proceeded to put the last touch to her toilette, it was with a smile of satisfied pride that she looked around her, and felt that all her wishes had been accomplished. When she returned to the outer room prepared to receive her guests, with a light in her eyes and a glow upon her cheek which heightened her matronly beauty ; with her still bright and abundant dark hair plainly banded across her smooth brow, and gathered in a heavy knot at the back of her head, and the ample folds of her rich black velvet dress falling gracefully about her fine and fully-developed form, she looked as though, had she cared to do so, she might even have challenged the rivalry of her beautiful daughter.

But no idle vanity or thought of self at that moment occupied the maternal bosom of Mrs. Heathcote ; in all that was brightest and best she saw only objects which would please and gratify her child ; and then her thoughts wandered away into the future, and she dreamt dreams so gladdening to a mother's heart, that she had not one unoccupied instant in which to remember that she might herself still prove an object of attraction to many.

There is perhaps nothing more beautiful

on earth than the self-abnegation of a mother! And where, as in Mrs. Heathcote's case, that mother is possessed of sufficient personal beauty to please, the quality is enhanced tenfold. Let this be remembered as a counterpoise to the weak ambition which led her to commit a folly unworthy of herself and of her deep and earnest affection for her child. But we must not anticipate.

Ten o'clock had scarcely struck from the or-molu and malachite time-piece on the velvet-draped mantel when the guests began to arrive, and the rooms rapidly filled. Laura looked pre-eminently handsome, but not quite so self-possessed as might have been desired. Her fair cheek flushed and faded, and in the midst of the flattery by which she was surrounded her eyes wandered restlessly towards the staircase. Among the earlier arrivals were the Willoughby family, and as the lady offered a couple of fingers to her sister, she glanced curiously about her, concluding the rapid survey by remarking:—

“Ah, the old set, I see, as usual. Surely, Arabella, it was scarcely worth while to make quite such a gorgeous display of the wealth which it cost your poor husband the labour

of a lifetime to amass, in order to entertain or astonish a parcel of people who are fully aware of the amount of your settlement? It is all really very pretty—very pretty, indeed—and does your upholsterer and florist infinite credit; but it is a sad pity that it should be so thrown away. By the by, you must forgive Sir Marmaduke and myself if we should seem rather flat at your ball; we know so few of your friends, and we were very latelast night at Lady Deborah Downcastle's whist-party. However, we will do our best to keep awake."

And Lady Willoughby swept on, in order to pass her judgment upon the arrangements of the other rooms, in the same kind and conciliatory spirit in which she had accosted her sister.

Meanwhile Sir Marmaduke had sunk with a growl into a capacious arm-chair; from whence "the sixteenth baronet," as his wife delighted to call him, could command an admirable view of the company as they arrived, and convince himself (greatly to his satisfaction, for the long-descended but shallow-pated old gentleman was most undeniably jealous of his affluent sister-in-law) that Lord Ravenswood was not among them.

"A sharp attack of the gout, as I prophesied, my love;" whispered Lady Willoughby, as she returned to his side; "how could Arabella be such a fool?"

She was answered by a quiet chuckle.

"And only imagine," she pursued, with a scornful curl of the lip; "the first thing that wrong-headed boy Arthur did was to endeavour to engage Laura for the first dance, when she had the presumption to tell him that she was engaged. Engaged, indeed! No doubt the poor child is as mad as her mother, and is waiting in the hope of opening the ball with the Earl's favourite. What an absurd affair it is altogether! Look at her—in a little dress of white muslin, and without even a flower in her hair, like a young miss upon a short allowance of pocket-money. How I do loathe such affectation!"

"Lord Ravenswood—Mr. and Miss Greville"—announced the servant who stood near Mrs. Heathcote; and Lady Willoughby grasped the arm of her husband's chair, as she quivered with annoyance and disappointment.

The Earl had not been attacked by gout after all!

In the next instant Lady Willoughby glided

towards her sister, until she was near enough to hear what passed between her and her newly-arrived guests.

As she reached the desired spot, Lord Ravenswood was excusing himself in the most courtly terms for his tardy appearance. He had dined at the Palace, and had been unable to leave before eleven o'clock. "I am quite aware," he added; "that fashion would have still allowed me a couple of hours, had I desired it: but, my dear madam, I did *not* desire it; and after your extreme courtesy in remembering my young people, from whom I always regret to be separated on every occasion when I am certain to feel gratified myself, I was anxious not to lose a moment in availing myself, and them, of your kindness. And now, will you honour me with your arm while we make a tour of the rooms, and endeavour to discover your fair daughter among the dancers? I have as yet only seen her from a distance, but what I *have* seen of her renders me doubly anxious to make her acquaintance."

The heart of Mrs. Heathcote bounded as she took the offered arm, and passed on without even seeing her discomfited sister, whom the presence of the Earl had compelled to

abdicate her fancied supremacy under the roof of her untitled relative. Mr. and Miss Greville followed in their wake; the quiet elegance of the one, and the strikingly handsome person of the other, attracting all eyes.

"I cannot think where my little girl has hidden herself;" said the hostess, when they had vainly sought her among the dancers; and Ferdinand Greville was beginning to believe that something very dreadful must have happened to the young heiress. "Ha! yonder she stands, in the bay of the window. Naughty little puss! what can make her so idle?"

As the group approached Laura turned her head, and when her eyes met those of Ferdinand she coloured deeply; nor was the young man himself less agitated. He had not been in the presence of Miss Heathcote since she so tacitly dismissed him; and he had yet to learn the effect produced upon her by his letter. The unassuming grace with which she acknowledged the flattering attention of the Earl, and the sweet earnestness with which she welcomed his sister, tended, however, to reassure him; and when, after having presented Arthur Willoughby, with whom she had been conversing, to Miss Gre-

ville, in order that he might secure her hand for a quadrille which was then forming, she bowed her acceptance of himself as her own partner in the same dance, he could discover no trace of displeasure, although she was evidently somewhat fluttered.

“The Fates favour you, Ferdinand;” said Lord Ravenswood, as he turned away, with the happy mother still leaning on his arm; “you have secured the most charming ornament of this truly charming ball.”

We have already intimated that the Earl was one of those rare individuals who found his own happiness in conducing to that of others; and having yielded to the entreaties of his young wards that he would accept the unexpected, and somewhat *hazardé* invitation of Mrs. Heathcote, he had resolved to do everything in his power to render himself agreeable to her.

It is singular, but it is nevertheless true, that there is a sort of isolation in a crowded ball-room particularly favourable to those little *tête-à-tête* conferences which are not intended for listeners. Every couple are engrossed by themselves, and care not what is going on about them; vanity and excitement,

and sometimes jealousy and anxiety, serve to distract the attention even of the most curious from their neighbours; and whatever they may subsequently strive to remember, and imagine that they have discovered, it is certain that in the *entrain* of the dance they have eyes and thoughts only for themselves.

Mr. Greville appeared to be by no means ignorant of this fact, and acted accordingly. The principal drawing-room was infinitely the most crowded, and towards that he led his partner, murmuring, as they with some difficulty made their way through the glittering throng: —

“Dare I hope, Miss Heathcote, that I am forgiven?”

“Are you aware that you need forgiveness, Mr. Greville?” was the evasive rejoinder.

“I am only too well aware of it; if, indeed, it be a crime to lay bare the best and most holy feelings of one’s heart.”

“I never supposed that there was anything very reprehensible in telling the truth,” said Laura, jesuitically. “But, dear me! we are forgetting that it is our turn to dance, and that——”

“How is it possible not to forget every-

thing when beside you?" asked Ferdinand tenderly.

"*La Cendrillon*, Mr. Greville: your *vis-à-vis* offers you her hand."

"You wilfully misunderstand me;" said the young man, when he had regained his place; "be merciful; and if you are indeed seriously offended by the liberty I took, when I had no other means of telling you——"

"Be careful, Mr. Greville; you will be overheard!"

"Ah! Miss Heathcote; do not be inexorable. One word from you will suffice to make me either the most happy or the most miserable of men. The quadrille is nearly over, and I may not perhaps be permitted to dance with you again the whole night—will you then leave me a prey to the most agonising uncertainty? Laura!" and he seized her hand as he trembled with emotion—"tell me, what have I to hope or fear?"

"Really, Mr. Greville;" gasped his companion, "you terrify me! What do you wish me to say?"

"What you feel—the truth, beautiful and beloved Laura! I may call you Laura, may I not?"

Miss Heathcote blushed and looked down, but the smile of happiness which played about her lips was a sufficient answer.

"Perhaps," whispered Greville, as his gaze was riveted upon her, "it would be ungenerous to ask more here, and now. But may I hope that I shall be permitted ere long to converse with you again, and to explain my meaning more fully?"

"I have no doubt that mamma will be happy to see you at any time."

"And her daughter, Miss Heathcote? Be merciful, and say that I shall be welcome to you also. Still silent! Do you not pity me?"

"I would do so willingly if I considered that you required pity."

"And can you think that I do not? Can you think that any one by whom you are beloved, and who knows not your own feelings towards him, can be otherwise than miserable?"

"In that case," said Laura; "I should be very ungrateful not to pity you. But really, Mr. Greville, this is so sudden—only the second time that we have met—and——"

"Only the second time that we have

spoken, you should rather say, Miss Heathcote; for have we not met in spirit for many, many months? Did you feel as though I were a stranger to you on that happy morning when I first looked upon you in your home? If so, my hopes are overthrown indeed; for to me you were one long loved, whose bright form had haunted me in my dreams, and upon whose smile hung all my dearest visions. Did you require to be told at that moment that my future destiny was in your hands?"

"How could I guess, Mr. Greville?"

"You could *not* guess! You must have been well aware that such was the case. And now, only one word, Laura, only one word, and I will urge you no further: May I call upon Mrs. Heathcote to-morrow?"

The hand of the young lady rested on the arm of her partner, as he was leading her to a seat; and although the word was not spoken, a sudden gleam of joy lighted up his handsome face. The little fingers had taken upon themselves to reply to a question with which the tongue did not dare to trust itself, and Greville was satisfied.

CHAPTER VI.

A DELICATE NEGOTIATION.

MONTHS again passed on, but far different were they both in feeling and effect from those which had preceded the eventful ball of which mention was made in the last chapter. Pleased with the matronly and dignified manner of Mrs. Heathcote, and fascinated by the grace and beauty of her daughter, Lord Ravenswood saw, with considerable gratification, the growing friendship between the two girls; nor was he, perhaps, without a latent hope that the high principles and handsome person of Ferdinand might win favour in the eyes of the fair heiress. As we have already stated, the Earl was a needy man, trammelled by the debts of an improvident father; and great as his affection for his wards might be, he could not, as he was painfully aware, make such a provision for them in after life as

would have satisfied that affection. Almost unconsciously, therefore, he encouraged the intimacy between the two families; and ere long he was frequently to be found engaged at a whist-table in Mrs. Heathcote's drawing-room, while the younger members of the party were occupied with music or conversation; and quite as frequently were his agreeable neighbours to be seen in his own circle.

The result of this intimacy in the case of Ferdinand Greville and Laura Heathcote may be easily foreseen, and more than once had the young man urged upon his blushing and beautiful mistress the expediency of revealing to Lord Ravenswood and her mother the secret of their mutual attachment, and as often had he been deterred by her entreaties from so doing.

"We are so happy now, dear Ferdinand;" she said; "and, as I have told you, mamma is so thoroughly resolved that I shall not marry before I am eighteen, that any proposal made to her before that period will only induce her to forbid your coming so constantly to the house, and that might perhaps bring on a coolness between Enna and myself, which would make me quite miserable;

so do be guided by me in this matter like a good boy, and you will see when the time comes that I have done right."

Of course Greville had no alternative but to submit, though he did so with an ill grace, for he was not without occasional misgivings that his treasure might even yet be filched from him; and thus the long, weary, endless year of probation, as he considered it, at length came to a close, and once more the drawing-rooms of Mrs. Heathcote were resplendent with light, and loud with music, in honour of her daughter's birthday. Proud and triumphant were the look and bearing of the happy mother; more proud and more triumphant, perhaps, than the occasion might appear to justify, for Mrs. Heathcote had laid bare to none the secret hope which caused her eye to sparkle and her cheek to glow; and if at times a transient shadow passed over her brow, as though there were one drop of bitterness in her cup of joy, it was soon dispelled by brighter musings.

As Miss Greville leant on the arm of Mr. Carlyon, for he was also among the guests, a change had come over her also, and she by no means appeared to listen unwillingly to

words which were evidently intended for no ear, save her own. Nor, although her eye perpetually wandered to her brother and the fair Laura, about whom he was constantly hovering, was she the less attentive to the tale so earnestly told. On the contrary, it was because she saw in the attachment of the two beings she best loved on earth a deliverance from the heart-trammel by which she had voluntarily bound herself, that she also began to feel how greatly she had miscalculated her own strength. In becoming the husband of the young heiress, Ferdinand would no longer require the pecuniary sacrifice at her hands which she had been prepared to make ; while she was at the same time thoroughly convinced that no thought of money had ever sullied the purity of his affection. Thus, then, she was free to think of her own happiness, and to believe that it in no small degree depended on the fascinating and accomplished Augustus Carlyon.

Of Ferdinand and Laura it is needless to say more than that they loved each other with all the ardour of two young fresh hearts, and hoped, as at that age we have all hoped in our turn, fully and fearlessly, and without one

misgiving with regard to that future which appeared to be now almost within their grasp.

Nor were they alone full of glad anticipations on that eventful evening, for more than one of Miss Heathcote's suitors remembered that the excuse formerly made to the reception of their addresses had been based simply upon the extreme youth of the gentle heiress, and that the period before which they were forbidden to renew their demand for her hand had at length arrived. Great, therefore, was the emulation which had been thus excited; and as Laura smiled on all alike, so did each in turn believe himself to be the highly favoured individual destined to become the happy possessor both of her love and her scarcely less coveted thousands. And so the dance went on, and the hum of voices, the rustle of silken draperies, and the fall of rapid footsteps, blended harmoniously with the tones of the orchestra, when Mrs. Heathcote, having seen Lord Ravenswood comfortably seated at the whist-table, softly approached Mr. Greville, and in a low whisper requested him to follow her.

"I wish to speak to you in private;" she said with a smile; "and the opportunity

appears to me so favourable that I am unwilling to lose it. You will, therefore, I feel quite sure, forgive me for tearing you away from the pleasures of the ball-room for a few minutes."

"A ball-room is not such a novelty to me, my dear madam;" replied Ferdinand, as his heart began to beat quick and fast; "that I should put even yours in competition with so great a favour as you are about to confer on me; for what can be a higher honour than to be admitted to a lady's confidence?"

"A truce with compliments!" was the hasty rejoinder; "the subject which I am about to discuss with you is a serious one."

"If you indeed think me worthy——" stammered Ferdinand, somewhat staggered by her manner.

"Come with me, then, to my boudoir;" was the reply, as the lady disappeared over the threshold of a small apartment which had been transformed for the evening into a very skilful fac simile of the hall of the Alhambra Court in the Crystal Palace, and which gleamed and glittered with all the gilding and gorgeousness of Owen Jones' creation.

As Ferdinand silently followed her, and at

a gesture of her hand closed the door behind him, his agitation increased. It was quite evident that Mrs. Heathcote had spoken truly when she said that their conference would be no idle one. Endeavour as she might to control herself, he at once saw that she was scarcely less excited than himself. What had he to hope? or what to fear? As they seated themselves upon a divan she drew off her gloves, and then for an instant appeared deeply interested in examining the delicate embroidery of her handkerchief, like a person who felt some embarrassment in commencing the conversation; while Greville watched her with an anxiety which increased until it became positive pain.

“As I said, I greatly wish to speak to you, my dear young friend;” she began at length; “on a subject which, however, you will only partially be able to comprehend, for it is on the deep, exclusive, and almost absorbing affection of a mother towards her loved and only child.”

“Are you about to speak of Miss Heathcote?” interposed her listener, almost breathlessly. “Nay, then, believe me when I assure you that I can indeed understand how bound-

less, how devoted it must be in your case, with such a child to love."

"True;" smiled his companion; "and thus you will be at no loss to conceive that the happiness of Laura is the great ambition of my life, before which the poor conventionalities of society fade into utter insignificance."

"And can I—may I hope that I—have it in my power to contribute to the happiness of Miss Heathcote? Is it possible that you consider me worthy to co-operate with you in so glorious a work as that of ——"

"Yes, Mr. Greville; yes. Young as you are, you are one of the very few in whose good faith and sincere regard for both Laura and myself I feel that I can place the most implicit confidence; nor am I trusting merely to my own judgment in acting as I have decided upon doing to-night, for the terms in which you have been spoken of by Lord Ravenswood on every occasion when you have accidentally become the subject of discourse between us, have confirmed and strengthened the high opinion which I had myself previously formed of your frankness and stability of character."

"My dear madam ——"

"Hear me out, Mr. Greville. As I have

already said, my own happiness depends on that of Laura ; but even my love, great as it is, might prove incompetent of itself to secure this one end of my existence, and I have arrived at the conclusion that you alone can assist me in rendering it sure."

"I, madam? How shall I ever sufficiently thank you for so flattering, so unhopd-for an avowal?"

"By complying with the dearest wish of my heart. My daughter has now reached an age when, bitter as it will be to me to feel that I am no longer the exclusive object of her affection, I must resign myself to see it shared by another."

Ferdinand attempted to look his sympathy in this maternal trial, but signally failed.

"I believe her to be perfectly heart-free ;" pursued Mrs. Heathcote. "I may, indeed, go so far as to say, that I am convinced of it ; and that the husband whom I shall select for her will be accepted without hesitation by Laura. This husband I have already selected ; he is a man of high birth and ancient family, whose position in society is sufficiently eligible to lift her above a host of petty annoyances, upon which it would be idle to expatiate, but

from which I have long determined to emancipate myself. You are well aware, as every one must necessarily be who has been intimately acquainted with my family for months, that I have been subjected by my own sister to mortifications and slights innumerable because, unlike herself, I married from pure affection, and became the wife of a man who was the architect of his own fortunes. For fifteen years, Mr. Greville, I have endured these insults in silence, but the time is come at last for me to assert myself, and to repay scorn by scorn."

"But what connexion, may I ask," interposed Ferdinand; "can there possibly be between the coarse attacks of Lady Willoughby and the marriage of Miss Heathcote?"

"Have I not already explained to you, Mr. Greville, that it is by her marriage that I shall be enabled to defy the malice of my sister; and that it is you, and you only, who can enable me to do so?"

"Can it indeed be possible that my senses do not deceive me, and that ——"

"Our interview will never come to a close if you do not hear me patiently to the end;" said Mrs. Heathcote, laying her hand lightly,

but impressively, on his arm. "If the brilliant vision in which I have indulged for my dear child can ever be realised, I feel satisfied that it must be through your agency."

"My agency, madam? For pity's sake explain yourself!" exclaimed Ferdinand, with blanched cheeks and quivering lips.

"I will do so frankly. The husband I desire for my daughter is one with whom you have great and deserved influence. I allude, of course, to Lord Ravenswood."

"Lord Ravenswood!" echoed her astonished auditor.

"Even so. The Earl does not possess such an income as his rank demands, while my daughter is worthy of a prouder name than that bequeathed to her by her father; and thus you must at once acknowledge, Mr. Greville, that in such an alliance as the one which I propose the benefit would be mutual. Lord Ravenswood can give Laura a coronet; while she can in return release him from all the difficulties by which he is at present trammelled."

"I must surely dream, madam!" faltered Ferdinand; "You would not bestow the hand of your daughter, who has only this

very day completed her eighteenth year, upon a man who is upwards of fifty years of age! Oh, no, no! you love your child, and could not, would not, thus sacrifice her to your own ambition!"

"Mr. Greville, you forget yourself;" said his companion, with a harshness of look and tone which she had never before exhibited in his presence; "and permit me to add, that gratitude to a person to whom you are so deeply indebted as to Lord Ravenswood, should have induced you to speak of him with less disrespect, and to welcome with joy any prospect so favourable to his fortunes as that which you receive so coldly."

"Coldly, madam!" once more echoed the heart-stricken young man; "Do not deceive yourself. It is with no coldness that I listen to so extraordinary a proposition; but rather with an astonishment so great, that I have no words to express it. Am I really to understand that you would so sacrifice your daughter—your only one?"

"Sacrifice her!" in her turn repeated Mrs. Heathcote indignantly. "So harsh a term is scarcely flattering to one who has strong claims alike upon your gratitude and your respect."

“ I am quite aware of all that I owe to Lord Ravenswood,” was the haughty reply ; for the proud spirit of Greville revolted against the insolent tone adoped by his companion. “ I am conscious of the deference which is due to him, and of the affection which he has a right to claim from one to whom he has been even more than a father ; but, madam, though I would gladly pour out my heart’s blood to secure his happiness, I cannot, I do not, feel myself called upon to urge him to a measure which would involve him in ridicule, and lay him open to the accusation of having turned fortune-hunter in his old age. Nor would you escape censure ; even you, Mrs. Heathcote, who are so morbidly anxious to release yourself at so fatal a price from the sting of rancorous tongues. No one can be more perfectly conscious than myself of the estimable qualities of Lord Ravenswood, or how worthy he is of the universal esteem in which he is held ; no one has probed his nature more deeply than I have done—I, his adopted son ; and, consequently, no one is so well able to appreciate the nobleness of his character. Do not, therefore, mistake me. It is out of my deep affection for him that I deprecate the very idea of such a marriage ;

and you must forgive me if I tell you, without reserve, that all the influence which I possess over him I shall exert to prevent his terminating a life of honour and usefulness by an act of folly. You are aware, and must do me the justice to remember, that I did not solicit the confidence which you have placed in me; that it was in obedience to your wishes only that I have become cognisant of your intentions; and now I have only to repeat that I decidedly decline all interference in an affair which my reason and my principles alike condemn; together with my assurance that, from this moment, I shall endeavour to forget that this conversation has ever taken place."

"Such is your resolution, sir?"

"My final resolution."

"You will not—in fact, you absolutely refuse to co-operate with me in bringing about this marriage?"

"Distinctly and decidedly."

"So be it then;" said Mrs. Heathcote coldly; "I have no intention to urge you further on the subject; but I must still, if you will allow me to do so, detain you a short time longer. I had two motives for requesting this interview: you are aware of one of

these; and we will now, with your permission, examine into the other."

"I am at your disposal, madam, and I sincerely trust that I may have it in my power to convince you, ere we part, that a sense of honour alone induced me to disappoint your confidence in my willingness to meet your wishes."

"Do not be alarmed, Mr. Greville;" was the reply; "I am not about to make a second demand upon your presumed regard for my family. What I have now to say and do requires no co-operation on your part. I have merely a communication to make to you; and, having so done, I will detain you no longer."

As she spoke, Mrs. Heathcote rose, and unlocked an inlaid cabinet, from which she withdrew a small packet; and then, with a heightened colour, and a firm grasp upon the papers, she reseated herself beside her bewildered companion.

CHAPTER VII.

A SECRET.

“ You will perhaps think, Mr. Greville—and you will be right ; ” said the hostess, after a most uncomfortable pause — “ that I have chosen an extraordinary moment in which to reveal to you a secret even more important to yourself than to me ; but circumstances, which I certainly did not anticipate, have determined me to do so without further delay. I am sorry — sincerely sorry — to find that the friendship which I was anxious to extend to you has not been reciprocated, and that I have an unpleasant duty forced upon me from which I might otherwise have escaped altogether.”

“ My dear madam, what can you possibly mean ? ” exclaimed the young man, with undisguised alarm ; “ You are surely not about to forbid me your house because —— ”

"One moment, Mr. Greville. At the close of our present interview it will depend entirely on yourself whether my doors will be opened to you even more freely than they have yet been, or closed against you for ever. May I ask you one question, and request of you to reply to it? Do me the justice to believe that it is prompted by no idle curiosity, but simply to prevent all error on my part."

"I am at your orders, madam."

"Am I wrong in believing, Mr. Greville, that you are the son of the Hon. Captain Greville, who on his voyage to America was lost at sea?"

"I am his only son."

"Your father, sir, in that case, had numerous business transactions with my late husband. Were you aware of this fact?"

"I was not."

"I really regret to wound your feelings ;" pursued Mrs. Heathcote, "but you have left me no alternative ; and I am consequently compelled to inform you, Mr. Greville, that they were not all equally honourable to his memory."

"Madam !"

"We will not waste words ;" continued

the lady, in a subdued voice, full of cold determination; "here are two bills ——" and as she spoke she withdrew them from their envelope; "I found them among my husband's papers."

"Well, madam."

"They are—*forgeries!*"

Greville bounded from the sofa. "And in what can they concern me or mine?" he asked impetuously.

"Look at the body of those bills,—are they, or are they not, in the handwriting of your father? Examine the signatures—the individual by whom they are assumed to have been signed denies all previous knowledge of their existence, and has affirmed on oath that he never put his hand to them."

Ferdinand sank back almost convulsed upon the sofa, and buried his face in his hands. His brain burned, his veins ran fire. What was he? Where was he? Should this accusation be a true one, he was the son of a felon; and he loved the daughter of the woman who held in her hands the damning evidence of his father's guilt and of his own dishonour!

"Oh, madam;" he at length faltered out; "have pity upon me, and tell me that

you are only playing upon my credulity in order to punish me for opposing your wishes ! I cannot—dare not, believe that you are serious, or that this is other than a fatal mistake. My poor father was thoughtless, imprudent—improvident, if you will—but he never was guilty.”

“Never, perhaps, save in this instance ; but these proofs, Mr. Greville, will admit of no argument.”

Again there was silence in that gorgeous and glittering apartment, save that faintly through the closed door came the sound of mirthful music and the muffled reverberation of many bounding feet, making the silence still more deep and painful. All was life and joy beyond, but all was death and despair within !

“If this indeed be so,” gasped out the soul-stricken young man, as soon as he could control his voice ; “my path is plain, and I have only to throw myself upon your mercy. My first duty is to redeem my father’s memory. No one is better aware than you are of the position of Enna and myself. Take all we have, only let those papers be destroyed. I am young and strong, and it may

be that power will be granted to me to suffice to our support. Not later than to-morrow I will realize our joint property, if you will allow me to liquidate this debt."

"It amounts to four thousand pounds, sir."

"It shall be paid, even though it should leave us beggars, if you will suffer me to wipe away this stain from the name of my unhappy parent. And oh, madam! oh, Mrs. Heathcote! if a life of gratitude, of devotion—if the sacrifice of all my worldly prospects and all my worldly hopes to your interests will repay you for your mercy, I here swear to you that I will not fail."

"I ask no sacrifice;" was the cold reply to this impassioned appeal. "I care not for the amount of these—these forgeries; I have no wish to extort money; I am no usurer, no Shylock to ask a pound of flesh for the forfeiture of my bond. *Your* ruin would afford me no pleasure, no satisfaction; and I tell you plainly, and at once, that no price, be it what it may, shall purchase these papers."

A deep groan burst from the overcharged heart of her listener.

"And yet they may be yours, Mr. Gre-

ville;" she pursued in a more genial tone: "you have but to say one word, and I will destroy them before your eyes."

"And that word ——?"

"Use your influence with Lord Ravenswood, as I have already requested you to do. It is possible that you may fail; but even in that case, if you can only convince me that you have done all in your power to assist my views, I will in your presence destroy ——"

"Oh, say no more! say no more!" exclaimed the wretched Ferdinand; "I am but too bitterly conscious that not only my own destiny, but that of my poor Enna also, is now dependent upon your generosity—upon your mercy. We could not live to be branded with dishonour, to be a mark for the finger of scorn; and did you ask my life, I would kneel to you and bless you: but, fallen as I am, I am crushed only by the shadow of another's guilt: in myself I am as yet sinless. Oh, do not urge me to an act against which my nature revolts, and which would make me blush at my own unworthiness."

"As you please, Mr. Greville. I have named my conditions, and it now therefore only remains with yourself to accept or to

reject them. We will, whenever it is agreeable to you, return to the ball-room ; and you can, before leaving the house, favour me with your final decision."

"The ball-room !" murmured her companion, as a sharp spasm passed over his frame ; "Aye, true ; the happy and the honoured dance and feast—I had forgotten—I, who am no longer either honoured or happy."

"It only depends upon yourself to be both."

"But how, madam ? How ? What do you imagine that Lord Ravenswood would think of me, were I to advise him to solicit the hand of your daughter ? Could he do otherwise than imagine that I had some interested motive in urging him to contract a marriage so utterly disproportionate, and so ill suited to maintain the high character for sense and judgment which he has always borne ? Oh, do not ask me to become hateful to myself by sacrificing the honour of my benefactor, the *one* friend of my life, to my own interests. I will do anything, everything but this. The money shall be paid. But I had forgotten ;" he pursued, in a tone of anguish : "years have elapsed since those fatal bills were negotiated

—the interest upon them has accumulated, and I may not possess the necessary funds to redeem them—lost, miserable wretch that I am !”

“ Be calm, Mr. Greville ; I have already told you that there was no question of money between us.”

“ But those papers must be destroyed.”

“ Whenever you please.”

“ Enna must never know her father’s guilt.”

“ That will depend upon yourself.”

“ Are there, indeed, no other terms upon which —— ?”

“ None.”

Ferdinand rose, and strode up and down the floor, his eyes glassy and his lips quivering. Laura was lost to him ; for never, after what had just passed between her mother and himself, could he hope that Mrs. Heathcote would, under any circumstances, consent to receive him as a son. And then he thought of Enna ; her prospects also would be blighted, should the disgraceful secret become known : for Carlyon, fondly as he was attached to her, would never brook an alliance with the daughter of a forger. And that forger, was he not his father ? And was it not his most sacred

duty to wipe away the plague-spot of crime by which his grave was desecrated? What was life to him now? A little more suffering, or a little less, what did it avail? Lord Ravenswood might suspect him of some unworthy and self-interested motive should he suggest to him an act of folly, which must bring ridicule upon his grey hairs; for how could he suspect that every argument advanced by his adopted son had wrung a blood-drop from his heart? Well, he must bear it all. And had the felon's son a right to complain? No, no; the sin of the father was visited upon the child, and he must abide the punishment.

He paused beside Mrs. Heathcote, and twice he essayed to speak before he could articulate a sound; but the words came at last, cold, slow, and measured, like the plashing of water upon a rock.

"You have conquered, madam;" he said; "and may you never repent what has passed this night. I pledge you my honour—if indeed you will still admit such a pledge from me—that I will exert all my influence over Lord Ravenswood to induce him to become the husband of your daughter."

"To prove to you that I have firm faith in your promise, Mr. Greville;" was the rejoinder of his hostess; "and to prevent any after-scruple from tempting you to recant it, these papers shall be at once destroyed.

And, rising as she spoke, she approached an argand lamp which stood upon the table, held the packet over the flame, and then threw it, blazing as it was, to the ground.

"From this moment," she said with a smile which wrung the aching heart of her almost breathless companion; "I shall cease to remember that I ever knew or heard of any member of the Greville family, save the adopted children of Lord Ravenswood."

Ferdinand crushed the papers under his foot, with set teeth and hands so forcibly clenched together, that his fingers became bloodless beneath the violence of the pressure. His word was pledged—his honour—his self-respect—and his hopes in the future were the price that he had paid for the few blackened remains of his father's crime. He did not utter a syllable, but the whole agony of a lifetime seemed compressed into that moment. At length a deep sigh of relief dispelled the suffocating sensation in his throat, and he

looked up. As he did so, his eyes met those of Mrs. Heathcote; and then fell, for he could not brook their exulting expression; she had bought him at a price, and he was henceforward the slave of her will. It was a fearful conviction, and he shrunk from it with more loathing than he would have shrunk from fetters of iron; for he was bound in soul, and thus the freedom of his limbs was a mere mockery.

"Come, come, Mr. Greville;" whispered his hostess; "you take this matter too much to heart. You should remember that the guilt was not yours; but that, on the contrary, you have had it in your power to conceal its consequences for ever. Believe me that I feel deeply for you; but when you are some years older you will be better able to understand that the world is full of trial, and that it frequently happens that we suffer more from the faults and errors of others than from our own."

"I am just now in no position to refute the assertion, madam;" said Greville bitterly. "It is a lesson which has been early learned by my father's son, and one which I am never likely to forget."

“ You must, however, endeavour to do so ; and you should remember that the penalty which you have paid for his imprudence is, after all, a very light one : for surely, my dear Mr. Greville, it is not such a formidable hardship to serve the interests of one who holds you in very high regard ? Do not fancy for a moment that you have lost ground in my esteem—far from it ; I shall always consider myself the obliged person in this affair : for I cannot, and will not, doubt that I have, in you, secured a fast and faithful ally. But do not let us dwell any longer upon so unpleasant a subject. We will bury the past in oblivion, and look only to the future. Come, we will now return to our friends, or our absence may cause surprise. Be kind enough to give me your arm, and be assured that we are fast friends for ever.”

The poor young man mechanically obeyed. He even strove to smile, but it was such a smile as would have gladdened Mephistophiles upon the lips of Faust ; and amid the sound of music, the flashing of jewels, and the glare of lamps, he conducted Mrs. Heathcote to the side of her daughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST STORM-CLOUD.

LAURA was not dancing; indeed, from the moment in which she had seen Mr. Greville disappear with her mother, she had felt it impossible to do so: her heart, overflowing with happiness, could suggest only one reason for a private interview so strangely timed. It was her eighteenth birthday; her fond mother had read her secret, and some delicious indiscretion on the part of Ferdinand having convinced her that their affection was mutual, she was about to spare them all further suspense, by assuring him of her consent to their union. How, at such an agitating moment, could she think of anything, find amusement in anything, save in following up in fancy the eventful conversation in the boudoir? Poor Laura! The empty compliments and wearisome attentions by which she was overwhelmed

on all sides, almost drove her mad! Could she only have escaped to her own room, have hidden herself she cared not where, so that she might be alone with her deep, deep joy, what a relief it would have been to her! But she dared not stir, for at each instant Ferdinand might return; and so she compelled herself to endure the idle and irksome assiduities of her hundred-and-one admirers, in order that she might not cheat herself through her own weakness of a few more instants of happiness. She pictured to her eager fancy how he would look when he reappeared—she could see the proud flashing of his eye, the glow of triumph upon his brow: there would be no need of words; one glance, one pressure of the hand, and the tale would be told. And now Laura, in her turn, watched the movements of Enna; how graceful and beautiful she looked in her quiet and new-born joy! Oh, there again words would have been idle to inform the fair heiress that her friend was as thoroughly heart-thralled as herself. This conviction was delightful to her; they should all be so very, very happy! And that dear old Lord Ravenswood, with his soft voice and his benignant smile, she could

already hear him uttering a bridal blessing, in which she was included.

Condemned criminals have declared more than once, that during the night which preceded their execution they dreamt of the best and brightest of their past days, and had visions of an existence of happiness still to come; but so blessed a sleep could not endure long, and then came the waking and the death-toll, and the yelling multitude and the gaunt gallows!

Laura stole one look at Ferdinand as he approached her with Mrs. Heathcote leaning on his arm, and her pulses appeared to stand still, as though checked by an ice-bolt; there was indeed a smile upon the lips of her mother, but despair was written in legible characters upon the forehead of him she loved. He did not even glance towards her; but after having, with a profound bow, relinquished his charge, he traversed the room with a hasty and unsteady step; and before she had recovered herself sufficiently to reply to the accumulated and somewhat incoherent questionings addressed to her by Mrs. Heathcote, who had become alarmed on remarking the excess of her agitation and her extreme pallor,

she saw him leave the room accompanied by his sister, followed shortly afterwards by Lord Ravenswood. What could it mean? Why should Ferdinand, instead of hurrying to her side, have avoided her so rudely? What had passed—what could have passed—between him and her mother? Why had he left the house so abruptly, when he must be quite aware that, situated as they were, he should have been the last to linger—the last to go? Poor child! The first dark page of Life's volume had just been spread before her, and she was now about to read thereon that those who have learnt to love have also learnt to suffer. The whole scene swam before her; she was stunned by the music, blinded by the lights, bewildered by the floating draperies which whirled past and around her. What a mockery was everything, which only one short hour before had been so bright!

“You are ill, my darling—I am sure that you are ill”—were the first intelligible words which reached her ear.

“I think you are right, mamma;” she murmured in reply: “my head aches, and I feel giddy and faint. May I not go to my room? I shall not be missed in this crowd.”

“Of course you may, if you desire it, love;” said Mrs. Heathcote anxiously. “I cannot suffer you to risk your health unnecessarily, and the rooms are already thinning. Supper will shortly be announced, and I will send you some ice, which will, I know, refresh you. I see that Lord Ravenswood and the Grevilles are already gone.”

The calm tone of her mother would have dispelled all the apprehensions of Laura, could she have forgotten the strange manner of Ferdinand and the sudden departure of the Earl’s party: but this was impossible; and with the natural sensitiveness of her age and sex she began to ask herself whether she had not too readily permitted Ferdinand to read her heart, and to undervalue a love which had been bestowed upon him almost unasked.

Thankful, most thankful was she, when she found her head once more upon her pillow, her maid dismissed for the night, and herself at liberty to muse, and marvel, and weep without interruption.

A sad lesson is that which teaches us that there may be a luxury in tears!

For the first time in her life Laura never closed her eyes all night; and the day was

beginning to dawn when the last carriage drove from her mother's door. The birthday-ball was over; that ball to which she had looked forward with such eager hope—such happy confidence; and what had it brought to her? She had gathered one of the tempting apples of the Dead Lake, and her hand held the ashes into which it had crumbled!

At an early hour on the morrow Mrs. Heathcote was by the bedside of her daughter, and the fever-flush rose to the cheek of Laura, and her heart beat quick, as she returned the maternal kiss, and awaited the confidence for which she had pined throughout so many weary hours; but although Mrs. Heathcote had never been more anxious or more tender, not a word escaped her which could afford to the poor girl even the slightest insight into the mysterious interview in the boudoir; and the suspense became, after some time, so intolerable, that she determined to provoke an explanation, if it were possible to do so without directly questioning her mother in a manner which might excite her displeasure.

"I lost sight of you for a long time last night, mamma;" she said, pressing her lips to the hand in which her own was clasped; "and

I was sorry that I could not find you, for Lady Willoughby took possession of Lord Ravenswood the moment that the whist party broke up, and never left him afterwards till he went away, so that I am very much afraid she must have annoyed him ; for I am quite sure that he dislikes her, though he is too well bred to show any rudeness to your sister."

"How very provoking!" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote ; "She is for ever vexing me in one way or the other. What could *she* have to say to Lord Ravenswood? unless, indeed, it were to favour him with some sarcastic remarks upon us. Did they converse long together?"

"Certainly: more than a quarter of an hour."

"Why did you not join them and prevent this, Laura?"

"My dear mamma, how could I be guilty of such an impertinence? Besides, I was watching for you."

"And I was very particularly and seriously occupied, my darling ; occupied, as I ever am, in securing your happiness."

"Was not Mr. Greville with you, mamma? I saw you leave the room together."

"He was, Laura; and a very charming young man he is. I am quite delighted both with him and his sister."

"Oh, Enna is perfection! I cannot tell you how I love her."

"I am glad of it; and I hope that you will continue to like Miss Greville as well as I like her brother!"

Laura looked up in astonishment as she asked:—

"What can you mean, mamma?"

"You are surprised, love, that I should speak so warmly of this young man; and I do not wonder at it, as I am not in the habit of taking a violent fancy to any one: but I have no doubt that ere long you will have as great a regard for him as myself."

Laura fell back petrified upon her pillow.

"There can be no mistake!" she murmured to herself; "My mother loves him! She is still young, still handsome; she is rich, and free to marry whom she pleases. I might have foreseen this. She looks rather like my elder sister than my parent; and then,

she is so winning, so attractive. Miserable, wretched being that I am! Misled by my own vanity, and unsuspecting of the truth that I have only served as a blind dupe, I have given away my heart to one who cares not for me, and who loves my mother! And shall I dare to blame her? Shall I dare to visit my own weakness upon *her*? How could I hope that it would be otherwise?"

Never had so sharp a pang struck to the soul of the poor girl. Like all who have cast their hoard of happiness upon one die, she believed, in her agony of spirit, that every one about her must have played for the same stake. She forgot the years of devotion during which the mother whom she now looked upon as a rival had immolated, to the sole affection of which she was herself the object, every other passion of her nature; how she had resisted every attempt which had been made to induce her to contract a second marriage; and she only felt that there was but one Ferdinand Greville in the world, and that he was resistless.

"I do not think that I ever met so delightful a person in my life as Lord Ravenswood;" said Mrs. Heathcote, after a short

silence, which she little guessed had been so full of misery to her child. "Do you not agree with me, Laura? He is so dignified, and yet so affable. He is certainly a most charming acquaintance; or I trust that I may now rather say, a most charming friend."

"I do *perfectly* agree with you, mamma;" was the languid reply. "He is one of the very nicest old gentlemen in the world, I sincerely believe."

"*Old* gentleman, my love!" was the somewhat discomfited rejoinder; "you have strange ideas of age, my dear child! He is not, certainly, what can strictly be called a young man, but he is still in the very prime of life!"

"Does it not strike you, mamma, that he is a little like my poor papa? or, rather, that he must have been like him some years ago? for I remember that papa was still young when we lost him. I was but a child then, it is true, but his kind face is still before me whenever I think of him."

"You have strange fancies, Laura, and I confess that I trace no resemblance whatever between them; and as to judging of the age of Lord Ravenswood, I should never attempt

anything of the kind : all that I know of him is that he is extremely handsome, and that any woman might be justly proud of such a husband, even were he not a man of high rank."

"You are right, dear mamma — quite right!" exclaimed Miss Heathcote, with sudden energy, as the emphatic manner of her mother engendered a new hope ; "he is, as you say, a most delightful person, and it is a sad pity that he is not as wealthy as he is good."

"You do him no more than justice, my own darling ;" was the smiling reply ; "and I am perfectly of your opinion ; nor can you guess the happiness which such an avowal from you has been to me. But you must try to get a little rest, for your poor cheeks are paler than I like to see them ; so good-by for an hour or two. Take care of yourself, and come down to luncheon looking less like an invalid than you do now."

So saying, Mrs. Heathcote fondly pressed her lips to those of the beloved child whom she was about to sacrifice to her wounded vanity, as the pagan priests hung garlands on the necks of the victims they offered as

holocausts to their gods ; and in another moment she left the apartment.

Happy, happy Laura ! She felt convinced that she had now fathomed the great secret. Her mother was to be Countess of Ravenswood : there could be no doubt of it. But why should Ferdinand have behaved so strangely ? The marriage of the Earl could in no way interfere with his own. On the contrary, it seemed to her that this double link between the two families was the most desirable thing that could happen. She sought in vain for a solution of the mystery ; and at length, wearied with thought, and anxious not to miss Mr. Greville when he called, as she persuaded herself that he must do in the course of the day, she rose from her bed, put on her prettiest and most becoming morning-dress, and established herself in the drawing-room to await his arrival.

CHAPTER IX.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

FERDINAND GREVILLE meanwhile left the house of Mrs. Heathcote like one oppressed by nightmare. Everything about him appeared false and unreal; he even doubted his own identity. Could it really be that love and honour had alike been lost in one brief hour? That the tenderest emotions of his heart, and the highest aspirations of his nature, were alike trodden into the dust? That the name which he had hitherto borne so proudly was a stigma and a disgrace, which the slightest accident might have made a world's scorn and byword? Oh, it was too, too much! He dared not look back upon the past, for was its main feature not written in characters that could only be purged by fire? And the future! What could the future now be to him? What must he be henceforth? The pitiful tool of

a stern and revengeful woman, whose foot was on his neck, and whose iron will must be his law. He had done his duty to his father ; but what was about to be his conduct towards the benefactor who had watched over his infancy, shielded his youth, and sustained his manhood ? Even the fact that in obeying the injunctions of Mrs. Heathcote he was crushing out his own heart's blood, did not affect him so bitterly as the conviction that he was about to become a traitor to his own conscience. Was there no way of escape ? He could discover none. The price of his perfidy had been paid, and he must earn his wages. He was bound hand and foot, and it was useless to struggle against his bonds. Should he even dare to betray his pledge, could he hope that his persecutor would keep his secret ? that his sister, whose sensitive spirit must wither beneath the least touch of shame, would be suffered to remain in ignorance of the load of obloquy by which they might be overwhelmed by one fatal word ? He could not entertain so wild a hope ; and thus fell with one crash all his bright visions of a stainless and honourable career. The straight path of truth and rectitude was closed against him for ever,

while the broad highway of treachery and falsehood spread out before him, and he felt that he was fated to follow it even to the end. What was he about to do? To betray the friend for whom he would have died; to deceive the woman who had trusted in his truth; to deny the principles which had hitherto been the rule of his life; and to become to himself an object of abhorrence and contempt. There is often no deeper tragedy than the workings of a human heart.

The most bitter portion of Greville's trial was the deep affection which he bore towards both the individuals whom he had bound himself to deceive. He could have endured his own unhappiness, and he could have struggled against it manfully, had it been free from shame and dishonour; a shame and a dishonour from which he had only liberated the memory of his father by casting the burthen upon himself: but his adopted father, whom he was bound to reverence? but the trusting girl to whom he had vowed an undying attachment? His position was hideous; and there were moments in which he began to fear that his brain must give way beneath the pressure.

Had Mrs. Heathcote only revealed to him her fatal secret at the commencement of their intimacy, he would, at any cost of misery to himself, have avoided all chance of meeting Laura, whose pride must, in that case, easily have triumphed over what she would have learned to regard as a mere passing infatuation; but it was now too late to hope that she could hold it so lightly; and thus her blighted youth would be the first-fruits of his apparent perfidy. And, then, to what a destiny was her heartless mother about to condemn her! for, estimable as he might be, it was impossible that a girl of Laura's age could love a man who, like Lord Ravenswood, was old enough to be her father.

And thus he coldly and resolutely reviewed the past. The bitter cup was at his lips, and he was resolved to drain it to the very dregs. He had written to the confiding girl to tell her that he loved her,—that her affection was essential to his existence; he had entreated her not to reject his suit,—to forgive his presumption, and to trust her happiness in his keeping; and when he became a guest in her mother's house he had renewed all these assurances, and had won her to confess that

the affection was mutual ; and now, without daring to explain to her the wretched cause of his apostasy, he was about to propose, nay more, to urge her marriage with another ; and to do this, not faintly or feebly, but with all the energy and perseverance which he could bring to bear upon the subject.

But should he, he asked himself, really have strength for this ? His conscience answered that the strength must be found in his memory of the pledge which he had given to Mrs. Heathcote. The proofs of his father's guilt existed no longer, it was true, but they had been destroyed in the full confidence that he would not forfeit his word ; and even fallen as he felt himself to be, he could not requite that confidence by an act of treachery. Of the sin which had been forced upon him he must endure all the consequences ; but he did not dare to increase a burthen which was already almost too heavy to bear.

In these miserable reflections the night wore slowly and wearily away, and the morning found Greville fevered and unrefreshed. As he was about to leave his room, the Earl's confidential servant met him with a request that he would, immediately that he had break-

fasted, join Lord Ravenswood in his study ; and hastily swallowing a cup of tea, with an aching head and a heavy heart he obeyed the summons.

His patron was already seated at his desk, engaged in making marginal notes upon some letters which were spread before him, and a kindly nod greeted his entrance.

"I am sorry to be compelled to request your services so early, my dear boy ;" said the Earl ; "when you can scarcely have recovered from last night's dissipation ; but I have pressing need of your assistance."

And as he spoke he thrust towards his young secretary a portion of the papers upon which he had been employed ; while so engrossed did he continue with the business before him, that the haggard appearance of Ferdinand passed unobserved.

Irksome as the task of writing letter after letter could not fail to be under such circumstances, the mental exertion was beneficial to him, and before his duties were concluded he had regained considerable self-control ; his nerves had become more steady ; and he was enabled, with more composure than he had hoped to attain, to enter into conversation with Lord Ravenswood.

“Our labour is now over for the day, Greville;” said the Earl; “and we have saved the early post, which was an essential point this morning; so at last I have time to ask you how you enjoyed your evening. Mrs. Heathcote is decidedly an admirable hostess; and many a woman of high rank, who believes that the mere empty fact of that rank gives her the privilege to neglect her guests, might profit by her example. I nowhere feel myself more thoroughly at home and at my ease than in that house; and I am very glad that we have become such good neighbours. Miss Heathcote is in every respect the friend whom I would have chosen for our dear Enna; while the lady herself appears to me to be a most devoted mother. It is really beautiful to hear how enthusiastically she speaks of her child. Indeed, to be quite frank with you, Ferdinand, had I been possessed of a little more presumption, and some twenty years younger, I might have been inclined to suspect that the handsome widow had a design upon my coronet. In fact, the more I reflect upon what passed between us, and certain expressions which escaped her as if unconsciously, the more I am led to believe that I should not have been

altogether mistaken if I had adopted some such idea."

"You can scarcely be surprised, my lord, even should it be so;" said Greville, forcing himself to reply; "Mrs. Heathcote would not, if my perspicuity has not been at fault, be the first person who has quarrelled with your celibacy."

"Well, well," laughed his companion; "*she* most assuredly did, though it was very prettily and gracefully done; so prettily and so gracefully indeed, that she almost brought me to agree with her. I only say *almost*, however, for I remembered in time that, unlike most old bachelors, I had a home and two dear children to make that home a happy one; so I would not be deluded into the admission that she had convinced me of my error."

Poor Ferdinand! How that affectionate assurance wrung his tortured spirit. But what right had *he* to feel? He must act; so he crushed down the rising agony as he replied: "There can, nevertheless, be no doubt that Mrs. Heathcote was perfectly right. You must not forget, my lord, that you are the inheritor of a proud name and exalted rank."

"And should these compel me to marry when I prefer a single life?"

"It would ill become me to dictate to you, my benefactor and best friend; but if you authorise me to offer an opinion ——"

"Do, not be sententious, Ferdinand, but speak out. As to my name and my rank, my nephew will perpetuate the one, and worthily represent the other."

"Still;" persisted the wretched young man, half choked by every word that he uttered; "there can be no doubt that during your own lifetime both might derive additional lustre from wealth; and in this case ——"

"Greville, you perfectly astonish me!" said the Earl: "this is the first time in your life you ever gave me cause to believe that you attached so much importance to money as to imagine that it could ennoble the nature of any man."

"I expressed myself badly;" was the reply; "I am, of course, quite aware that you cannot possibly require any adventitious aid to secure to you the esteem which you so richly merit. What I meant was ——"

"Never mind what you meant, Ferdinand, for I am convinced that it was nothing which

could pain me ; but rather tell me what possible analogy there can be between your golden speculations and the civilities of Mrs. Heathcote towards myself."

"I will endeavour to make my meaning better understood ;" said Greville, who, as the moment approached in which he felt that he must enter upon his arduous mission, began to fear that he should fail. "When I asserted that wealth would be highly desirable, even to you, I was looking only to your well-known generosity of heart ; and reflecting how frequently I had heard you express regret at your inability to perform some kind action. I know how severely you feel the privation when you are compelled to refuse help to the needy, and solace to the suffering. You are an ardent admirer of art, but it is out of your power to patronise it ; and thus you lose a thousand opportunities of encouraging struggling genius and patient industry."

"I admit that there is much truth in what you say, my dear boy ;" conceded Lord Ravenswood ; "but, knowing that I must submit to necessity, I do not permit myself to repine. Of that weakness, at least, I am not guilty."

"Still, when you can command a noble fortune why should you refuse it?"

"Command a noble fortune!" echoed the Earl; "and from whence is it to be derived?"

"Mrs. Heathcote is enormously wealthy
_____"

"Mrs. Heathcote! why, surely, you do not suppose me to be such a coxcomb as to imagine that she seriously wishes to become my wife?"

"Not precisely," was the brief rejoinder.

"Then pray explain the enigma, for it is impossible for me to do so."

"The ambition of Mrs. Heathcote;" said Greville, turning ashy pale; "is to bestow on you the hand of her daughter, with ten thousand a-year at present, and as much more in perspective."

"Her daughter! the hand of her daughter!" exclaimed Lord Ravenswood indignantly. "What authority have you for such an assertion?"

"Her own. She requested me last night to inform you that this alliance was the object of her greatest ambition."

"Can it be possible?" sternly asked the Earl; "has she forgotten that her daughter

is still a mere child, while I am rapidly becoming an old man? Such a sacrifice would be monstrous!"

"Why would it be a sacrifice?" persisted Ferdinand, resolved to redeem the pledge which he had given, bitterly as he hated the cause in which he was engaged; "I confess that I can see nothing monstrous in her wish to see Miss Heathcote become your wife. Do we not witness similar marriages every day?"

"We do, Ferdinand; but can you believe me to be one of those selfish and imbecile old men who, in order to enrich themselves, coldly condemn the young and the beautiful to a living death? If so, you have strangely misjudged me, and we have never understood each other. Am I a fitting target for the arrows of the malicious and the sneers of the censorious? I repeat that this idea is monstrous! Just consider to what you are urging me. Am I a suitable bridegroom for a lovely girl of eighteen? Could I ever hope to win the affections of a woman who requires only to be seen to be surrounded by adorers? Do you think that I could ever debase myself by playing the part of a slippered pantaloon,

and pursuing with my wig and wrinkles the active Columbine; who would for ever escape my clutch? You see that I am disposed to make merry over your notable project, and that is the only rational manner in which to treat it; although I confess that I regret to have received so absurd a proposal through you, for I thought you had known me better."

"Do not reproach me;" said the poor young man deprecatingly; "I may have been to blame in undertaking to deliver the message of Mrs. Heathcote; but believe me when I declare that I had no idea that I should incur your displeasure by so doing. Most gladly, indeed, would I have declined an office which certainly appeared to me to be wanting in delicacy, but she would take no denial. Moreover I thought, and you must pardon me if I say that I still think, you may command the affections of any woman, however young or however beautiful; nor can there be a doubt ——"

"Nonsense! nonsense!" interposed the Earl impatiently; "another word on this subject, and I will never set my foot in Mrs. Heathcote's house again."

Greville was silenced; but assuredly no

plenipotentiary was ever less mortified by the failure of his mission; and for a brief instant a flood of joy inundated his heart. There was no mistaking the sincerity of Lord Ravenswood; and Laura was saved. Yet for what? For whom? The burning tide rushed back. Not for him—not for him—for was not her mother still in possession of his fatal secret?

CHAPTER X.

A TRAGEDY.

FERDINAND was on his way to his own room, in order that he might reflect at leisure upon the manner in which he could, with the greatest delicacy, communicate to Mrs. Heathcote the failure of her darling scheme, when he was joined by his sister ; and, even pre-occupied as he was, he was instantly struck by the air of constraint and embarrassment with which she requested him to return with her to the breakfast-room, as she had something to confide to him. Apprehensive that some unpleasant occurrence had taken place, he did not hesitate to comply ; and they were no sooner standing side by side in the deep bay of the window, his arm about her waist and her cheek pillowed lovingly upon his shoulder, than in a low voice, and with a burning blush, Enna informed him, that since they last spoke upon

the subject she had changed her mind with regard to Mr. Carlyon, and had now determined to become his wife.

A cold shudder ran through the veins of Greville. He had already decided that the whole of their little fortune must imperatively be transferred to Mrs. Heathcote, in part payment of their father's debt; for until he had done all in his power to liquidate it he felt that his duty was still unfulfilled.

"Woman-like!" he exclaimed, as he withdrew his arm from the agitated girl, and affected anger in order to conceal his anguish; "You never know your own minds for an hour! It was at your request that I desired Carlyon not to persist in his addresses, and now you coolly admit that you were only coquetting, and that you are quite ready to marry him whenever he may feel so disposed! I beg to decline the task of lowering you in his esteem; and confess, Enna, that I gave you more credit for womanly dignity and self-respect."

"You are very cruel, Ferdinand;" said his sister; "to judge me so harshly, and to speak to me in so angry a tone."

"I am not angry, Enna, but I am pain-

fully disappointed;" was the reply; "you ought to feel as I do, that having decidedly rejected Carlyon, it would now be the height of indelicacy to recall him. I cannot tell you how mortified I was to see you dancing with him last night, when, since your rupture, I have studiously avoided him in order to spare his feelings."

"But you are not aware, Ferdinand, that at the ball he entreated me to revoke my decision, and that he persisted in those entreaties until I finally consented to do so. I will now confess to you that I always liked him, and that it was only from motives of prudence that I declined to become his wife. But you know, my dear brother;" she added playfully; "that the reasons by which I was then actuated exist no longer. I do not require to be told that ere long Laura will be my sister, and my poor little portion utterly useless to you; so that——"

"Enna;" said Greville, striving to retain his composure, and resisting the impulse which he felt to clasp the generous girl to his heart; "I will have no secrets from you, although it is painful to me to confess that you have every right to be displeased with

me. I ought to have done this sooner, and then my position would have been less onerous than it has become since your acceptance of Carlyon."

He paused! Only a day ago and he had been the very embodiment of truth; never had he permitted himself even to equivocate; and now, at the very moment when he had assured his unsuspecting sister that he was about to be perfectly frank with her, he was in reality endeavouring to invent some plausible falsehood, in order to conceal from her the frightful discovery which he had made on the previous morning.

"What *can* you have to tell me, Ferdinand?"

"You will learn it only too soon, my poor sister!" replied Greville, as he suddenly resolved upon his line of action; "and you must forgive me if I say that you are not altogether blameless for what has occurred: for had you not so positively assured me that on the death of Lord Ravenswood you should go to reside with your aunt, and that nothing should ever induce you to marry, I, on my side, should not have considered myself justified in disposing of our joint inheritance, as I

regret to say that I have been rash enough to do."

"But how have you disposed of it?" asked Miss Greville.

"I was weak enough to listen to the advice of a friend, and to enter into a speculation, by which I was assured that I should quadruple our small capital. The bubble has burst, however; and I fear that we shall save but little from the wreck."

"Do not reproach yourself, my dear Ferdinand!" said his sister tenderly; "I am quite sure that you did everything for the best, so we must bear this misfortune without repining. You are much more to pity than I can be, for you have been deceived and duped by men who could not appreciate your high principles and unsuspicious nature. Console yourself! You have only lost your money, but they have forfeited their honour, which, once gone, no riches can restore."

"Enough, enough, Enna!" interposed her brother hurriedly; "we will not discuss the honour of our family, lest the very transaction which I have just confessed to you should lead some uncharitable person to doubt my own. You cannot marry Carlyon; his

income is by no means a large one, and he cannot afford to take a wife without a penny. We must wait for a time with patience—brighter days may come; and now let us terminate this conversation, which, at the present moment, is very painful to me.”

“So be it, my dear brother! But I do beseech of you not to allow this miserable question of money to prey upon your mind and affect your temper. I scarcely know you to-day; and I would rather resign every shilling that I possess than feel that I had lost your affection.”

And so they parted: Enna bewildered and in tears, and Greville with a new sin upon his soul. He was fairly in the toils; and the deep groan which escaped from his overcharged heart, as his fond and confiding sister disappeared, bore witness to the intense agony of his spirit.

“Oh, my father!” he murmured to himself, as he sank, overcome by moral exhaustion, on a sofa, and buried his throbbing temples among the cushions; “oh, my father! if it be possible that you can see my anguish, intercede for me; for I am very, very wretched!”

Only a few days after this conversation between the brother and sister, Ferdinand was once more hastily summoned to the presence of the Earl, whom he found pacing his study in visible agitation.

"Greville;" he said, as the young man entered the apartment; "I have some important and very melancholy news to communicate to you; and yet I confess that it is difficult for me to utter words of condolence where there is so much to console you for the fearful misfortune which has occurred."

Ferdinand sank breathless upon a chair. By what new misery was he to be overwhelmed? What consolation could there be for him under any trial?

"Compose yourself, my dear boy;" pursued Lord Ravenswood; "and believe my experience when I tell you that there is no great evil in this world without its concomitant good."

Ferdinand with difficulty suppressed a groan.

"Was the daughter of Lord Sotheby, who married a Mr. Marston, any relative of yours?"

"She was not, my lord."

"As I never before heard you mention her, and that she has never sought to deprive

me of your society, I hoped as much ; and I trust that there was no great feeling of attachment towards her on your part ?”

“ There could not be, my lord, for we have never met. I have heard from my sister, that she was a person of warm heart, but of extremely eccentric habits ; and that just previously to the death of my father, chancing to meet Enna, she formed so strong an attachment for her as to offer to adopt her, should she consent to such a measure ; and this the poor child would assuredly have done had you not, at the very moment when she became an orphan, received her under your own roof, and re-united her to her forgotten brother,—for your lordship may remember, that from the age of four years I had never seen my home.”

“ I am aware of it, my poor boy.”

“ I had nearly forgotten the circumstance ;” pursued Ferdinand ; “ when Lady Maria most kindly replied to a letter addressed to her by my sister a year or two ago, again offering her a home beneath her roof, should she ever desire to place herself under her protection ; and consequently, although nearly a stranger to us both, we have cause to feel grateful for her generous consideration.”

“And had Enna any intention to avail herself of this proposition?” asked the Earl greatly disturbed.

“None whatever; at least, not at present: but it was a great relief to us both to know that, should a moment arrive in which we felt that circumstances ——”

“I understand — I understand;” interposed Lord Ravenswood; “and now tell me—Had you any expectations from Lady Maria?”

“Not the slightest. For the handsome property of her husband was bequeathed to herself in trust for her son——”

“After which ——”

“After which, I have been told, that as Mr. Marston had outlived all his relations, the said property, in the event of his son’s dying unmarried, was absolutely at her own disposal.”

“True—you have been rightly informed; and nothing remains for me, save to acquaint you with the fact that, acting upon her husband’s Will, Lady Maria, in the dread of such a contingency—for the boy was sickly from his birth—for some reason which it is now impossible to fathom, made her own in her turn, and has constituted you her sole heir.”

"Me?" exclaimed Greville, almost incredulously.

"What I tell you is as true as it is strange;" pursued the Earl; "and I can only conjecture that the terms in which our dear Enna has spoken of you during her correspondence with Lady Maria must have been her inducement to act as she has done."

"Then why not have left her property to Enna herself?"

"Because there is a condition annexed to the bequest which your sister could not have fulfilled. And now, my dear boy, I have to relate to you the sad circumstances under which you inherit this princely fortune."

Greville listened earnestly and breathlessly, but he could not articulate a syllable.

"The tale which I have to tell is a sad one;" continued Lord Ravenswood; lifting a letter from the table, and slowly withdrawing it from its envelope. "Lady Maria had taken her son to Italy for the benefit of his health, the state of which caused her great uneasiness; and for a time she appears to have had every reason to congratulate herself on the beneficial effect produced by the change of climate: but information reached her friends only a few days since, that both mother and son had been

drowned in the lake of Como. No possible explanation can be given as to the cause of this fatal accident. The day, it would appear, was calm and bright, and scarcely a breath of wind rippled the surface of the water; nevertheless, the boat in which they were seated suddenly capsized, and while the boatmen struck out and swam towards the shore, your unfortunate benefactress and her son perished."

"But the bodies?" gasped out Ferdinand.

"They have been recovered, and are now on their way to England, under the charge of an old and faithful servant; and you have a trying duty before you, my dear Greville; as the letter which I hold in my hand has been written, not only to inform me of the fatal event, but also to inquire if I am able to vouch for your identity, and if so, to urge me to hasten your departure from town, in order that you may be ready to receive the remains of the unhappy victims when they reach home."

"It seems like a horrid dream!" murmured the young man.

"It is, indeed, a most fearful visitation;" said Lord Ravenswood soothingly; "but you must not dwell upon the more painful points of the subject; new and urgent duties have

devolved upon you, and they must be fulfilled: Poor Enna! I fear that she will feel this misfortune deeply; and you must do your utmost to counteract the effects of the shock. After your departure for Sussex I will watch over her with the care and tenderness of a father; and no doubt her friend, Miss Heathcote ——”

“Yes, it will be better so;” exclaimed Ferdinand, starting to his feet; “I will go at once. I must see my sister—there has been a cloud between us—I have been harsh and unkind; but she also will find comfort when I tell her that I shall never so pain her again. Forgive me, oh! forgive me, my more than father, for all my faults—all my errors—they shall be atoned, even as they have already been ——”

“Greville, you are beside yourself!” said the Earl, as he grasped his hand; “what faults, what errors can you have to atone? You who, from your boyhood up, have been the very soul of truth and honour! you, upon whose uprightness I would pledge my existence; who have been led into no vice; indulged in no excesses; you, in short, the son of my affection and the solace of my

declining years. Go, boy; go to your sister; and if indeed, as you say, there has been any cause of displeasure between you, let it be forgotten and blotted out for ever. Not another word!—leave me.”

And thrusting him from the room, Lord Ravenswood closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FRIENDS.

WE will pass briefly over the events which rapidly succeeded each other during the two following months. Suffice it that, through the precautions taken by the Earl, Greville experienced no difficulty in establishing his claim to the Marston property; which he, however, found encumbered by a clause, through which he was required to assume the name and arms of the Marston family. For a moment an acute feeling of annoyance at this discovery passed over him; but it did not last. What had he to regret in resigning a name which was tainted by dishonour, in order to replace it by one which was still pure and unsullied? And then his thoughts fastened upon the motto of the Grevilles—*Per sempre*.

“It is mine no longer;” he murmured to

himself; "and I accept the omen. The guilt of another is not to cling to me for ever! Miserable I may be—must be—but my name will no longer be branded with disgrace."

As the Earl of Sotheby had no son, the title and entailed estates devolved to a distant cousin; who could, however, advance no claim to the personal property of Lady Maria's husband, bequeathed to her under her husband's Will. Thus there was no rational ground for litigation, when the identity of Ferdinand had once been proved; and Mr. Greville-Marston accordingly returned to town, no longer the almost dependent of Lord Ravenswood, but a much more wealthy man than his patron.

The painful event which had thrown the Earl's circle into mourning, necessarily compelled Mrs. Heathcote to abandon for a time her matrimonial projects; while Ferdinand's prolonged absence from her house was attributed to the legal business consequent upon his inheritance.

This pretext was, however, far from satisfying the anxious and bewildered Laura; who, ignorant of her mother's ambitious designs, painfully felt that no business, be it as im-

portant as it might, could excuse the neglect of her lover; and when she remembered his abrupt departure on the night of the ball—the last time that they had ever met—strange forebodings of some evil to come weighed upon her spirits; she grew pale and thin, and her only pleasure was to sit beside Miss Greville in her grief, and to weep when she wept.

Those tears were a relief to her, and Enna loved her the better for her sympathy; but when at length the gentle mourner grew more composed, and was able to talk over the altered circumstances of her idolised brother, she found her friend cold and taciturn; and at length ventured to reproach her for her indifference to the interests of one by whom she was so tenderly beloved.

Then, indeed, the poor girl's strength failed her; and throwing herself upon the bosom of her friend, she poured forth all her fears and all her suffering. Miss Greville, ignorant as herself of the fatal nature of the interview in the boudoir, did not hesitate to console her by assurances of the deep affection of Ferdinand; and by reminding her that the only impediment to their union—that of his want of fortune—was now removed.

“ Deeply painful as was the event by which he has been enriched, my dear Laura ;” she pursued ; “ he may now plead his cause with less reluctance to Mrs. Heathcote, and with more confidence than he could otherwise have done. You know that Ferdinand is proud, and tenacious of his honour ; and had your mother expressed the slightest suspicion that it was your fortune which he coveted, it would have cut him to the soul. I am glad that you have been frank with me, for I feel as though you were already my own dear little sister ; and I trust that there are yet many, many bright days in store for us all.”

“ Including Mr. Carlyon ?” inquired her companion archly, as she dashed away her tears, and strove to smile.

“ Including Mr. Carlyon ;” acquiesced Miss Greville ; “ for I will not affect to misunderstand you. Yes, Laura, I hope to be as happy as yourself. This sudden wealth, for which I suspect that neither of us would have greatly cared under other circumstances, will probably work as fortunate a change in my destiny as in your own. Augustus Carlyon is not rich, and prudential motives

might probably have compelled me to resign the hope of becoming his wife. Now, however ——”

“Do not play the prude, Enna; Mr. Carlyon would never have yielded to your ‘prudential motives,’ I am quite sure;” said Laura with a pretty pout; “I only wish that I were as certain of the affection of Ferdinand as you are of that of Augustus. I shall call him Augustus, as he is to be my brother-in-law.”

“Naughty little sceptic!” was the reply of Miss Greville, as she pressed her lips to the blushing cheek of the fair girl; “beware, lest I betray your unbelief to Ferdinand, and he should punish you as you deserve.”

“Enna;” suddenly exclaimed her companion, as with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes she released herself from the clasp of the fond arms which were twined about her; “I cannot endure to hear you jest upon such a subject! Mark what I say: should your brother deceive me—and I seem to have a foreshadowing that he *will* deceive me —— But no, no; it is not that—I scarcely know what is passing in my own heart. I will not suspect—will not accuse him—but I say again,

should the one dream of my life prove false—should I not become the wife of your brother—then I will not answer for the misery which may ensue. I am young in years, but I am firm in purpose. I will not be treated as a puppet; as a tool, with which others may work out their own purposes; as a child, who must be frightened by a rod, or deluded by a toy. I have that within me which must enable me to assert myself; and the determination will be as decided as the power.”

“Laura, you terrify me!” exclaimed Miss Greville; “what can cause this excitement?”

“The conviction that I am not understood; the assurance, whence derived I know not, that I am marked out as the victim of some influence over which I have no control. So be it; I am still mistress of myself. The Romans could fetter the limbs of their captives, and send them to the arena to die, but they could not fetter the soul. And so will it be with me. Mine is a nature that can love but once; and woe be to them who cross my path, and seek to blight my existence!”

“My dear, dear Laura!”

“True;” said the excited girl, suddenly

recovering her composure ; “ your meek and beautiful nature cannot comprehend me : we are like snow and fire. But you must forgive me, Enna, were it only for the deep love which I bear to your brother.”

“ Rely upon it, Laura, that your affection is as fervently returned ; and I confess that I am at a loss to account for the extraordinary idea by which you appear to be possessed at the very moment when everything would seem to conduce to your marriage with Ferdinand. Only a few weeks ago Mrs. Heathcote might indeed have refused to sanction it, owing to the inadequacy of his fortune ; but now, no such impediment stands in the way ; while, as regards both his birth and his principles, she could not desire a more eligible son-in-law.”

“ All you say is quite true, Enna ; but the more I reflect upon his conduct after that interview with mamma, the more I am convinced that, for some reason or other, known only to themselves, he has ceased to think of me as a wife.”

“ Be more rational, my dear girl, and do not torment yourself unnecessarily ;” said her companion ; “ only a few weeks ago I was speaking of you to my brother, and telling him that

I had discovered his secret ; I even alluded to your marriage, and he did not utter a word which could lead me to suppose that he had resigned his pretensions to your hand."

"But;" asked Laura eagerly ; "did he appear anxious to have the affair definitively settled ? Did he say that he would at once speak to my mother upon the subject, as he has for the last year been urging me to let him do ? Tell me exactly what he said when you mentioned the subject."

"Really;" said Miss Greville, with a start and a look of unmistakable distress ; "I am quite unable to repeat his words. For to tell you the truth, Laura;" she pursued, striving to conceal the sudden misgiving which had come over her ; "during that very conversation Ferdinand and I had the first misunderstanding of our lives ; and I was so painfully agitated that I cannot precisely remember what passed."

Miss Heathcote shook her head.

"I am answered, Enna;" she said, as she rose from beside her friend ; "for I know your unselfish nature well enough to be convinced that, even under those circumstances, you would not have forgotten anything which

interested me so deeply. That there *is* a mystery I am now more satisfied than ever ; and I will not rest until I have discovered its meaning."

Enna did not reply, for a similar conviction had suddenly grown up in her own mind. Now that she recalled the past, and remembered the harsh and evasive manner of her brother, she no longer entertained a doubt that he had pleaded his suit to Mrs. Heathcote, and that it had been rejected : in which case she easily understood that, as Ferdinand had never confided to her his love for Laura, his pride would not allow him to acknowledge that he was a discarded suitor. Still, however, she would not be discouraged ; for, even supposing that such were indeed the fact, still that rejection would have occurred before the death of Lady Maria Marston, and when he was, in a worldly point of view, by no means an eligible husband for the wealthy heiress ; while so short a time had yet elapsed since his change of fortune, that it would have been grossly indelicate on the part of Mrs. Heathcote had she intimated any change of purpose to Ferdinand. That, under the circumstances, he should studiously avoid meeting Laura,

was natural enough ; and she, consequently, in far less time than it has taken us to follow up her train of thought, came to the conclusion that there was no mystery in the business after all ; and that in a few weeks, or at the latest a few months, everything would be once more smooth and bright.

It was also quite impossible that her brother should absent himself much longer from the house of Mrs. Heathcote ; common courtesy would not permit, after the intimacy which existed between the two families, that he should show her so great a slight. But Enna was wrong. Day by day went by, and when Ferdinand was not closeted with the Earl, he was constantly absent from home on the pretext of pressing business, though he never explained either its progress or its nature ; and at length Miss Greville remarked that even Lord Ravenswood himself had evidently begun to derive much less gratification from the society of his fair neighbours than he had formerly evinced. Still, neither the one nor the other uttered a word which could lead her to suppose that any coldness had in fact grown up between them ; and she was compelled to await, with what patience she might, the solu-

tion of an enigma which she was at present unable to fathom.

Laura, meanwhile, found herself utterly unable to endure the state of irritating suspense to which she had been so unexpectedly condemned. Hitherto she had seen not only her wishes, but even her whims, forestalled by the tenderness of her mother; and now, when she felt that the whole future happiness of her life was at stake, she suddenly perceived that from that hitherto anxious and affectionate mother she must expect neither support nor sympathy.

She could not know that the keenest suffering of Ferdinand existed in the consciousness that, let his worldly circumstances change as they might, he could never again hope to possess the hand of Laura; and that, with the usual perversity of human nature, the more he became convinced of this fact, the more his passion for her increased. But if she could not feel convinced of this, her ardent nature led her, nevertheless, to divine that he could not in so short a time have conquered an attachment of whose sincerity she had never seriously doubted for an instant; and young as she was in years, she had too much

strength of will to sit down tamely to weep over the extinction of all her hopes, while there remained one prospect of compelling their fulfilment.

Why, she asked herself, should women be perpetually the slaves of social prejudice, and condemned to conceal their best and holiest feelings, while men are permitted to parade their tastes, wishes, and preferences before the world? Do they feel more deeply or more sincerely than we do? I cannot believe it. Ferdinand has assured me of his love—it was mine—and I have every right to believe that I still retain it, until he himself confesses that he loves me no longer. Why should I remain in doubt on so vital a point? Can it really be unwomanly and immodest, situated as we have been for months, to afford him the opportunity of justifying himself in my eyes? Surely not. I owe it both to him and to myself to ascertain precisely our mutual position. If he be really the heartless flirt which circumstances have made him appear, the sooner I learn to forget that I ever loved him the happier it will be for us both; while if, on the contrary, he is like myself, the victim of some hidden plot, some vile worldly con-

sideration, a little moral courage on my part may at once terminate our present suspense and suffering.

Miss Heathcote, as this resolution will evince, knew little of the world and its exigences, or she would have been at once aware that in all trials of the heart a woman's only resource is silence and submission : she, however, was the creature of impulse rather than of reason ; her whole heart was bound up in Ferdinand, and she would not submit to resign him without a struggle.

While these thoughts were passing through her mind she had instinctively and almost unconsciously seated herself at her writing-table ; and ere long she was pouring forth her fervid feelings upon paper, with as much confidence and as little compunction as though she had been writing to one of her own sex. Rapidly her flexile pen travelled over page after page ; and at length the letter was written, folded, and addressed ; and she remained with her eyes riveted on the name which to her was the dearest upon earth, when the drawing-room door was suddenly opened, and a servant announced Miss Greville.

Laura rose hastily to receive her friend, and, either from forgetfulness or design, left her letter upon the table.

"I am come, dear Laura;" said her visitor; "to see if I can induce you to do me a pleasure. Lord Ravenswood is anxious that I should once more go into public, and has been kind enough to take a box at the Opera for to-night, in order that I may be present at Grisi's last appearance in Norma; I have two seats to offer to Mrs. Heathcote and yourself, should you have made no other engagement; and I need not say how delighted I shall be if you will accept them. Lord Ravenswood is unfortunately engaged, but Ferdinand will be our escort."

"Delightful!" exclaimed Laura, as the colour mounted to her cheeks, and her eyes beamed with pleasure; "how very kind of you, with your numerous friends, to think of us! Is your brother aware of your project?"

"Not yet; but I shall see him in an hour or two."

The cheek of Miss Heathcote suddenly lost its bloom.

"Shall I;" she asked; "go and inform my mother of your kind invitation?"

“Yes, dear ; you had better do so, lest she should make any other engagement.”

Laura left the room.

When she had been absent a few minutes Miss Greville rose from her seat, and amused herself for a time by examining some paintings which lay upon the table ; and having exhausted this source of occupation she listlessly turned over a few books and pamphlets which were scattered among them, when her eye fell upon a letter addressed to her brother, in the handwriting of Miss Heathcote.

“What can this mean ?” she murmured ; “A letter to Ferdinand ! Of course, I did not require so undeniable a proof of their mutual affection ; but I certainly was not aware that it had grown into a correspondence. What a pleasing discovery ! Dear Ferdinand is, indeed, loved as he deserves to be, when such confidence is placed in his honour. Strange that Laura should leave her letters about so openly ! and yet her apparent heedlessness may perhaps have been design. She may find some difficulty in forwarding them to their address, and have trusted to my tact in this instance to assist her. She shall not be disappointed. I will

spare her the embarrassment of asking me to take charge of this one, at least."

And, so saying, she carefully deposited it within her girdle.

Almost immediately afterwards Miss Heathcote reappeared, bearing the thanks of her mother, who was, she said, much gratified by the attention of Miss Greville, but greatly disappointed that the Earl could not be of the party. It was, however, (although on that point she was of course silent), some compensation to reflect that Marston could not evade a direct reply to the inquiries which she resolved to make as to the success of his mission to Lord Ravenswood.

CHAPTER XII.

A HEART-STRUGGLE.

"FERDINAND;" said his sister, as he entered the drawing-room; "I have ventured to make an engagement for you for this evening; and to promise that you will escort Mrs. Heathcote, Laura, and myself, to the Opera."

"To the Opera—to-night!" exclaimed the young man hurriedly; "it is quite impossible, Enna! I have already made an appointment in which I cannot fail."

"But;" urged Miss Greville; "Lord Ravenswood dines out, and is, consequently, unable to accompany us, so that we depend entirely on you; and I really do think ——"

"What can you possibly think, except what I tell you?" asked Ferdinand angrily; "Can you deny that you have no right to dispose of my time without my sanction? I have told you that I must be elsewhere this

evening ; and it is, therefore, quite clear that you must dispense with my presence."

"I have, unfortunately, answered for you."

"In that case you must be responsible for your own heedlessness. I cannot do impossibilities, nor do I exactly see that my escort is indispensable. Surely with such a *chaperone* as Mrs. Heathcote ——"

"But it will appear so discourteous."

"I am sorry for it, Enna ; but I have no alternative."

"Well, then, will you at least call and offer an apology?"

"For what? For your indiscretion? Certainly not. The fault is your own, and you only can repair it."

"My dear Ferdinand, how strangely you are altered!" said Miss Greville, almost in tears ; "if I loved you less, I should be half inclined to quarrel with you. However, I must beg Mrs. Heathcote to secure the protection of some gentleman of her acquaintance, for I am quite sure that Lord Ravenswood would not approve of my being seen in public accompanied only by ladies."

"No doubt she will readily find an escort:" was the curt reply ; "no man objects to

appear at the Opera with three pretty women."

"Except Mr. Greville-Marston," said his sister playfully; "but I will be generous, even although you have vexed me. . See, naughty boy! here's something for you!"

"A letter! and from whom?"

"Oh, indiscreet as I am, I do not venture to open your letters!"

"From whom did you receive it?"

"I found it on a table."

Ferdinand took the letter, and laid it on the chimneypiece."

"What! are you not going to read it?" asked his sister.

"Oh, there is time enough for that! But you had better write at once to Mrs. Heathcote, and explain how you are circumstanced;" was the rejoinder.

Enna withdrew to her own morning-room for that purpose; and after pacing up and down for a few minutes, the young man carelessly took up the letter and examined the superscription. In another instant the hot blood flew to his cheeks and forehead, and he eagerly tore open the envelope.

"From Laura!" he gasped out. "Ah,

there needed only this to compel me to drain my cup of bitterness to the dregs. Laura! Laura! how little must I have appeared to deserve this proof of your regard! You are unhappy; you are wretched; you fear that you have unconsciously given me offence; you tell me that you can never again know peace until I have forgiven you, and assured you that I still love you! Sweet, unsuspecting, confiding girl! And this letter, breathing the holiest and purest affection, the most undoubting faith, must remain unanswered—for what reply do I dare to make? Am I not in the toils? Heart-perjured and spirit-bound! Miserable wretch that I am, how shall I ever find strength to play my ignoble part to the end? She must cease to love me, for I am no longer worthy of her young innocence. Dishonoured, and sold for a price, what have we now in common? No, no! that dream is over. She must marry the Earl; him, and no other: for were it another, I feel that I should murder him!”

The Opera party was a very gloomy one. Arthur Willoughby replaced Ferdinand Marston, and openly declared the thing to be a bore. Laura with difficulty repressed her

tears ; Mrs. Heathcote did not even attempt to conceal her annoyance ; and Miss Greville, mortified to find that she had failed in giving pleasure, was ill at ease, and endeavoured to find amusement on the stage with very indifferent success. Had her brother been their escort, how different would all have appeared to her. But her feelings were bright when compared with those of her friend, who sat beside her cold, silent, and almost heart-broken. She could no longer doubt the indifference of Ferdinand ; that he had received her letter she was assured, for she had seen it in the girdle of Enna, and had not dared to reclaim it. How she hated herself for having written it ! How unwomanly and undignified did she now appear in her own eyes ! How he must scorn her for her bold assumption of his regard, and her pertinacity in insisting on its continuance ! And was it possible that, after having met with so gross an insult at his hands, she had still the weakness to love this man ? Several hours had elapsed since he must have been in possession of that wretched letter, and no reply had reached her ! She felt crushed and humbled to the dust. She had laid bare her heart before him, and he

had trampled it beneath his feet. Poor Laura ! her own affection was so sincere that she had found it impossible, until this evening, to believe that Ferdinand could be less true, less earnest than herself. But now all was over ; and she was bitterly conscious that it was too late to indulge in the hope that she could forget in her turn.

The reflections of Mrs. Heathcote were, meanwhile, very far from pleasant. She knew not to what cause she should attribute the silence of Mr. Greville-Marston ; but she, nevertheless, resolved not to abandon her purpose. To see her daughter a peeress was the one dream of her existence, alike waking and sleeping—a peeress, with, in all probability, a place at court ; for she was well aware that Lord Ravenswood had sufficient influence to procure this envied position for his wife—to see her admitted into a circle from which Lady Willoughby, despite her title, was excluded. Never would she resign this object of her ambition—this opportunity of humbling the insolent pride of her sister.

In her own person she cared not for the titles and honours which she coveted for Laura. Her habits, tastes, and manners were

confirmed, and she felt that each would require modification, should she be transplanted into a higher sphere than that to which she had been accustomed, a fact which could not fail to be irksome at her age; while the youth and docility of her child would enable her readily to adopt the bearing and prejudices of those about her, and to do honour to the rank which would enhance her wealth and beauty.

She was, as usual, plunged in these meditations a few days subsequently to the Operaparty, when a letter was put into her hands, which, at the first glance, she discovered to be from Ferdinand, and by which she learnt the failure of her hopes. Lord Ravenswood had, as he assured her, absolutely refused to entertain her proposal for an instant, and he earnestly entreated her to abandon the idea as unfeasible; declaring, however, at the same time, that should she decide otherwise, he would persevere in his attempt to second her wishes, although he confessed that he did not see the slightest probability of success.

This letter aroused alike the anger and the indignation of Mrs. Heathcote. She had no faith in Greville's professions of zeal, but instantly persuaded herself that he had been

lukewarm, even if not altogether supine, in the cause; for what, she mentally argued, could even Lord Ravenswood, noble as he was, desire in a wife that he would not find in Laura? Young, beautiful, and wealthy, she possessed every quality that the most fastidious husband could require; and it was consequently clear, that she had entrusted the interests of her daughter to one who had made no effort to ensure them. Like many other people, who consider themselves injured when their wishes and designs have failed of success, and who visit that failure upon those to whom they have confided their cause, she blindly accused Ferdinand of the overthrow of her hopes, and bitterly repented the confidence in his honour and integrity which had induced her, in a moment of greater generosity and high feeling, to destroy those evidences of his father's guilt, which, had they still been in existence, must, she thought, have made him her willing slave for ever.

Her reply to the letter of her victim was an earnest entreaty that he would persevere; an assurance that men who were no longer young were frequently as coy as school-girls; and a request that he would not fail to re-

member that he had pledged himself to secure, by this brilliant marriage, the future happiness of Laura.

Alas! Ferdinand held in his hand another letter, which only too fully convinced him that the intentions of the mother were by no means calculated to make the daughter happy.

At this period a mortgage, involving the greater portion of the Earl's landed property, was threatened with foreclosure; and the legal technicalities, his trammelled position, and the uncertainty of the result of this new embarrassment, at once disgusted his keen sense of right, and bewildered his mind. The tortuous labyrinth of chicanery, with all its contentious details clothed in obsolete terms, at once irritated and exhausted his nerves, and his health became visibly affected. In vain did his young and anxious *protégé* remind him that he was himself now the master of thousands, and that those thousands could not be better employed than in extricating from his difficulties the friend to whom he was indebted for more than life; Lord Ravenswood resolutely, and almost sternly, repudiated the offer.

"What, sir!" he asked, with a noble

indignation, which was painful but not surprising to Ferdinand; "can you for one moment believe that I would repay my debt to your father by wronging and impoverishing his children? Never repeat such a proposal, or we shall henceforth be strangers to each other."

"You shall be obeyed, sir;" said the young man; "but it is misery to me to see you thus harassed. What is to be done?"

"I know not;" was the desponding reply; "I am worse than a child in such a strait as this. Had I frank and honourable men to deal with, I could struggle on; but it is evident that the most ungenerous advantage is about to be taken of my helpless condition; and this conviction perfectly unhinges me. If I could only discover any honourable means of extricating myself from so frightful a dilemma I would at once avail myself of it; but I see none; and I painfully feel that a proud man soon becomes degraded in his own eyes when his honour and his sense of personal dignity are endangered."

"Why can it not be my privilege to restore your peace of mind?" said his companion sadly.

"I well know that you would do so with all your heart, my dear Ferdinand, were it possible."

"And if you would consent to permit it, my lord," was the rejoinder.

"What do you mean?" asked the Earl angrily; "are you also about to lose your respect for my orders, and to oppose me?"

"You cannot suspect me of such an intention;" said the young man, with calm self-assertion; "I was not about again to offer from myself that which you have so coldly rejected. You ask me what I mean? How can I venture to tell you, when I may, perhaps, by explaining my meaning, subject myself to your anger?"

"You must think very poorly of me, Ferdinand, if you conceive that I could be ungrateful for your filial sympathy and interest."

"Oh, no, Lord Ravenswood;" was the eager rejoinder; "that would be indeed impossible; but it is I who should be ungrateful did I not, at such an extremity as the present one, find sufficient moral courage to brave even your displeasure, in order to restore you to peace and happiness. Yes; be the result

what it may, I must speak,—would that I could only hope I might prevail! My lord, this state of things cannot continue; your honour demands your prompt extrication from difficulties which have been forced upon you, and with which you are unequal to contend. You have no time to lose, and no liberty of choice. Your only method of release, since you have refused to owe your liberation to me, must be at once adopted. Forgive me, my friend and benefactor, forgive me; but you have no alternative save to become the husband of Miss Heathcote.”

“Sir?”

“I will not be crushed by your frown, Lord Ravenswood;” persisted the wretched Greville firmly; “you, the representative of one of the proudest families in England, must not suffer your name to be tarnished, and your honour to be suspected. What is required of you? Nothing unworthy—nothing undignified—although you repudiated the idea on a former occasion, as if such a marriage would have involved disgrace. The lady is beautiful and pure: she has every claim to your admiration, save a proud name, which no one could better bestow upon her than

yourself. If I could only make you understand the impossibility of knowing you without loving you, every difficulty would disappear. Say that you will consent—that you will save yourself from ruin by an union from which you need anticipate nothing but happiness. Oh, if I could only prevail upon you to be just to yourself in this matter—if I could only ——”

“ Enough, Ferdinand, enough. Your vehemence unnerves me.”

“ Do you consent ? ”

“ Urge me no further.”

“ But I am not yet answered. Consider your position, Lord Ravenswood; and remember that I do not basely press upon you a marriage where you would sacrifice yourself for money; the lady is young and lovely ——”

“ Too young, and too lovely. How could I dare to hope that she had accepted me, and not my coronet ? ”

“ Ah! you relent. You will allow me to inform Mrs. Heathcote ——”

“ I have made no promise.”

“ I ask none ; ” gasped the wretched Greville ; “ I shall live to see you once more beyond all mere worldly anxieties, the dignity

of your ancient house restored, its threatened honour secured, its projected ruin averted. You dare not hesitate at such a crisis. Think of your ancestral home in the hands of strangers ; of the burial-vault of your forefathers desecrated by the intrusion of aliens from your race and name ; of your broad lands confiscated ; of your dependants scattered and abandoned. Think of all these things, and then contrast them with the destiny which depends only upon yourself."

Lord Ravenswood buried his face in his hands, and remained motionless.

"I have conquered!" exclaimed Ferdinand. "You will be true to yourself, to your race, and to your order. You will be no bankrupt peer, the object of plebeian scorn and of vulgar wonder ; but remain, as you have ever been, an honour to your rank and to your country. You must forgive my pertinacity, my more than father ; for never, never will I so presume again."

The Earl opened his arms, and the excited Greville fell upon his breast. Neither attempted to utter a word ; and as the clasp of Lord Ravenswood slowly relaxed, Ferdinand made his way to the door of the apartment, and disappeared.

Bewildered, and sick at heart, he reached his own room, where he sank into a seat. His strength was nearly spent. The Earl had tacitly consented, and Laura was lost to him for ever. A strange feeling of pride mingled, however, with his misery; for he was conscious that it was not merely in his own interest that he had acted throughout the trying scene which had just passed, but that he had resolutely sacrificed his happiness in order to secure that of his benefactor. He had that day acquitted a debt of twenty-five years' duration; for he adored Laura even while he betrothed her to another. The tears which he shed were nevertheless very bitter; and although he endeavoured to persuade himself that he rejoiced in his success, the poor young man was almost crushed beneath the weight of his despair.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CLOUD THICKENS.

ON the following day Marston had a long interview with Lord Ravenswood; at the close of which, with an unnatural calmness of look and bearing that bordered on apathy, he left the house. His face was very pale, but not a nerve shook as he delivered his card to the porter of Mrs. Heathcote, and slowly followed a servant to the drawing-room.

"Madam;" he said, as the door was closed behind him, and he bowed low, as if unconscious of the hand which was extended to welcome him, while he glanced rapidly round the apartment in order to convince himself that they were alone; "my mission is successfully performed. I have induced Lord Ravenswood to rescind his resolution, and your wish will be accomplished. I have every authority to inform you that it depends only

on yourself to see your daughter Countess of Ravenswood."

"Is it really possible?" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote exultingly. "How shall I ever find words to thank you, my generous and zealous friend?"

"I require no thanks, madam; none are due to me. You are sufficiently aware of one of the motives which induced me to undertake this negotiation; but of that which in reality induced its success you are ignorant. Let it suffice that the Earl has consented to become your son-in-law, and that I have redeemed my pledge. It has cost me much—very much—to do so; more than you will, probably, ever understand. And now, madam, I trust that you will respect your own promise."

"Surely, Mr. Greville-Marston cannot entertain a doubt on the subject?" said the lady loftily.

"You are right; I ought not to suspect your good faith," was the cold reply; "and we will not look back to the cause which has produced so desirable a result."

"For myself I can assure you, that I have already entirely forgotten it;" said Mrs.

Heathcote; "and I entreat of you to believe that no guest will be more welcome in my house than the friend who has made me the happiest of mothers."

"I am less fortunate;" sighed Ferdinand; "for I live only to remember. In a day or two, however, madam, the debt shall be paid."

"The debt, Mr. Greville-Marston? What debt?"

"My father's debt; for which, by allowing the papers to be destroyed, I rendered myself voluntarily answerable."

"You owe me nothing, sir; it is I, on the contrary, who have contracted an obligation towards you, which I shall never be able to repay."

"Do not mock me, madam; I do not put my feelings and my principles out to usury. I was not earning my release from an Israelitish bondage when I became an agent in your scheme; I was actuated by a higher and a holier impulse;" said Ferdinand proudly; "and I again repeat, that in a few days the debt will be liquidated."

"I shall refuse to receive money which I cannot legally prove to be owing to me."

"You will not do so"—was the firm rejoinder.

"And who can compel me to accept it?" asked Mrs. Heathcote angrily.

"You will accept it, because in any other case I shall have a right to complain of your want of delicacy towards me; and I do not think that, under existing circumstances, we can afford to become enemies."

"I will, then, since you insist upon it, receive the money as a deposit, which you may reclaim at any moment.

"As you please, so that my father's obligation is cancelled; I have no wish to cavil about the name in which you admit its acquittal. All that I care to know and feel is, that no member of my family has permanently wronged or injured one of yours."

"Really, Mr. Marston;" said Mrs. Heathcote, endeavouring to veil a considerable amount of irritation under an assumed suavity of manner; "I am quite disappointed in you. I had hoped that the—the uncomfortable scene in my boudoir once over, we should have been faster friends than ever. You know that money is no object to me; and I did think——"

“What did you think, madam?” demanded Ferdinand, with a haughty abruptness which made his companion bound in her seat. “You are perhaps aware, that by a strange circumstance I am as independent of pecuniary considerations as yourself. I am not for a moment comparing our financial resources; far from it; I have no desire to assume so much, although by a singular fatality I am more than indifferent to such a consideration as that before us: but believe me, that had it been otherwise, I would rather have toiled as a mechanic than that money should have remained unpaid.”

“You do not treat me generously, Mr. Marston.”

“I treat you justly, madam. You did me a service which I am ready to acknowledge, and I have endeavoured to requite the debt. I did not pay you for destroying the evidences of my family dishonour, nor will I be paid for placing a coronet on the brow of Miss Heathcote.”

“I shall in any case, as I have already said, consider the sum forced upon me only as a loan;” persisted the lady.

“Consider it in any light you please, pro-

vided that the debt is liquidated," said Ferdinand coldly; and with a low bow he left the room.

"Ah!" murmured the wretched young man to himself, as with bowed head and unstrung nerves he proceeded on his homeward path; "we are told that the Athenian senate condemned to death a youth who had mercilessly killed a dove which took refuge in his bosom from the pursuit of a hawk. What destiny would they have assigned to a heartless and ambitious woman, who could coldly sacrifice, in the indulgence of her own mean passions, a daughter to unhappiness and a fellow-creature to despair?"

This heart-struggle of the day was not yet, however, at an end. As he entered the drawing-room, in which at this hour he expected to find his sister, to whom he was anxious at once to confide the fact of what he had determined to call her self-deception as regarded him, and the coming betrothal of her friend to the Earl, he found, to his surprise and discomfiture, Lord Ravenswood quietly seated, awaiting his return.

"I guess the errand on which you left the house, my dear boy;" he said, as he extended

his hand; "and from what you told me this morning, I cannot doubt the result of your visit. But, Ferdinand, we must come to a perfect understanding upon the subject. I am far from feeling satisfied with myself. I yielded too readily to your arguments, and I cannot tell you what I have suffered during your absence. My sense of dignity is wounded, and I am discontented with myself. Nothing, not even the painful position in which I am placed, can altogether reconcile me to the concession I have made. I feel that my principles have capitulated, and the thought humbles me in my own eyes. Now hear me, Ferdinand; I positively insist that nothing further shall be done until I have thoroughly convinced myself that Miss Heathcote has no other attachment, and that our disparity in age does not render her averse to a marriage with me. That she, if unbiassed by the counsels of others, would become my wife simply from vanity, and the idle wish to bear a title, I cannot believe, as it would be incompatible with her guileless and enthusiastic character."

Alas for the fallibility of human nature! What the Earl had at first considered as an idea too monstrous and absurd to be enter-

tained for an instant, had already lost much of its ridicule in his eyes. He began to think that it might not be impossible for the young and blooming Laura to love him—the case would be by no means a solitary one; and also to forget that in the world such a marriage would excite the same amount of ridicule from which he had previously shrunk. Strange, too, that after having desired to see her the wife of his ward he should be able to reconcile himself to the project of making her his own! Herein, however, we must do him justice. The earnestness and pertinacity of Ferdinand to accomplish his guardian's union with Miss Heathcote had convinced him that Greville was still heart-whole; while, as he involuntarily argued with himself, he might have been as much mistaken with regard to the state of the young lady's affections as he evidently was in those of her presumed lover.

“At any rate,” he had mused; “I shall not probably live very long, and at my death she will be in the bloom of her life and beauty, a widow with the rank of a Countess, and a noble fortune. Thus, even should she one day regret that she had bestowed her hand on a man more than double her own age, the

sacrifice would be but a temporary one, as she would soon have an opportunity of repairing her error, and of making a second choice better suited to her years ; and, meanwhile, I would be to her a loving father, a zealous protector, a tender and unfailing friend. Should she therefore voluntarily consent to become my wife upon these terms, surely it cannot be base or unmanly in me to save the honour of my family by a step to which I am urged by her own mother. But I must not be expected to play the love-sick suitor ; I should loathe myself were I to be guilty of such egregious folly—vows of passion would be mocked by my grey hairs, and I should deserve to become the laughing-stock of all my acquaintances. I am a man of the world, and it is only as a man of the world that she must expect me to woo and win her. Ferdinand must arrange all the preliminaries of the marriage with Mrs. Heathcote.”

Long ere Marston’s reappearance, however, his original misgivings had returned, and he once more began to reproach himself for his selfishness and want of self-respect. The shallow sophistries by which he had sought to justify his conduct to himself would

not endure the test of his better reason, and the card-castle which he had so laboriously built up fell in ruins about him.

Thus he eagerly seized the only possible pretext for withdrawing his pledge by making the marriage dependent on the pleasure of Laura herself; and as Ferdinand briefly expressed his readiness to undertake this new mission, he added:—

“During your absence I have been endeavouring, somewhat unsuccessfully I am bound to admit, to persuade myself that I may have been fortunate enough to win her regard; but as this is extremely doubtful, I will not, I repeat, accept her hand until I am assured of the fact.”

“But you are now committed;” was the deprecatory rejoinder of Marston.

“Most certainly not, should Miss Heathcote exhibit the slightest reluctance to ratify her mother’s assurance;” was the calm rejoinder of the Earl; “and I find it difficult to forgive myself for the weakness of which I have been guilty. What right have I to sacrifice that sweet, inexperienced girl to my sordid necessities? But tell me what has happened, Ferdinand. You look agitated.”

"I am so; your solicitor has just been here, and I ventured to deny you."

"What could you fear in any case? Am I not a peer of the realm?"

"I feared nothing for your personal safety; *that* was secure: yet there are other evils, which it is well to ward off as long as possible. Proceedings were about to commence against you, which, without your sanction or concurrence, I have taken the liberty of stopping for two months."

"And how?"

"That I will explain when you have more time and leisure to enter into such particulars."

"Two months!" murmured the Earl bitterly; "I can do no more to relieve myself from this difficulty in two months than in two days. Which way am I to turn?"

"You have but one;" was the steady reply.

"I fear so," said Lord Ravenswood moodily. "I feel that the die is cast; and yet, Ferdinand;" he pursued, as his voice grew husky and tremulous; "you have assured me, upon your honour, that the first advances towards this ill-assorted marriage

were made by the mother of the young lady?"

"I did do so; and I solemnly repeat that assurance."

"Then I cannot afford to hesitate any longer. Let all be arranged as quietly and as speedily as possible. Do not allow me to become the theme of gossiping tongues before Miss Heathcote is my wife. And woe be to them who jest upon the subject after she is so! I am not yet old enough to forget that I can protect my honour. I say this, in the event of her entire and willing concurrence in her mother's wishes; but remember, I will become her husband upon no other terms. I prefer the ruin which is impending over me."

"Believe me, my dear lord, that you have no such result to apprehend."

"Go then, Ferdinand; and, without the slightest reservation, explain to Mrs. Heathcote the precise nature of my present position. Hide nothing from her. I will not owe the hand of her daughter to a sordid lie. Do not forget, moreover, that I *insist* upon the free and full consent of Laura herself; without which I would rather become an exile

from my country, and find a grave in a foreign land, than lead her to the altar only that she may fear and despise me. Leave me now, Ferdinand. You know my wishes, and you will respect them."

Marston bowed, and left the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

LOVE AND AMBITION.

LIFE is, after all, a melancholy problem, which the wisest among us are unable to solve. Royalty, "born beneath the purple," occasionally ends its career in an obscure corner of the earth, and owes the quiet of its very tomb to a simple individual, who had never dreamed of such a privilege. The infant, cradled on down, and draped in silks and laces, not unfrequently treads the world's paths in age clothed in rags, and sinks at last into a pauper's grave. While, on the other hand, the humbly-nurtured and the utterly obscure, gifted by nature with genius, or by fortune with extraordinary luck, rise into eminence, crush down by their wealth and their successes those who would have scorned them in their poverty, earn titles and honours, and are finally fol-

lowed to their last resting-place by the noble and the proud.

But, perhaps, amid the multitudinous trials of the world, none is greater than that of the patrician, dragged from his eminence by the iron chain which links him to the sordid necessities of existence; the tram-melled man of rank, who, through his own reckless improvidence or that of others, finds his coronet and his ermine unequal to preserve him from the petty cares from which his birthright would have seemed competent to secure him; and this was precisely the position of Lord Ravenswood—a position which, despite all his admirable qualities of mind and heart, he had not the moral courage to meet with resignation and self-confidence. Had he possessed a friend similarly situated with himself, who had exhibited the same weakness and instability of purpose of which he was about to be guilty, he would have scorned him from his very soul; and yet, such is the sophistry of human nature, that he gradually began, not only to excuse, but even to applaud himself for having arrived at a determination which he had originally spurned. He would not incur the ridicule of becoming a boy-lover; and what more

could his sense of dignity require? Ferdinand was right: it was his duty to screen his family name from shame and obloquy; to repair and consolidate the foundations of his house; to expiate the errors of the father by the prudence of the son; and perhaps to be enabled to bequeath to a nephew, to whom he was warmly attached, something beyond a mere bankrupt-peerage.

There does not, perchance, exist one man or woman of the world, who would not be ready to declare that he was perfectly wise and thoroughly rational in the course which he was about to pursue; for the world is a mammon-worshipper, and in such cases as that of the Earl holds that "the end justifies the means;" but there was, nevertheless, only too much reason to fear that the well-poised mind and delicate feelings of Lord Ravenswood would, at some later day, lead him to a very different conclusion.

The Rubicon was passed, however: *il avait brûlé ses vaisseaux*, and there was no retreat. Marston had departed on his mission; and should Mrs. Heathcote not shrink before the tale of ruin which he was authorised to confide to her, his fate was decided.

Perhaps Marston himself had some latent

hope that she would do so, but ere the thought was fully formed he absolutely hated himself for his ingratitude towards his life-long benefactor. No, no ; it was better that the suit of the Earl (if, indeed, it could so be called) should prosper ; that his best friend should be relieved from all future care and anxiety ; and that he should bear the burthen of wretchedness in his own person. Enna, too, might now be happy ; the barrier which separated her destiny from that of Carlyon was overthrown ; and he must live for others, even although he no longer valued life for his own sake.

Under the excitement and danger of the moment thus argued the Earl ; and under the excitement and despair of the moment thus argued Ferdinand ; and neither, at this particular crisis, permitted himself to remember that there were probably long years before him in which he might bitterly expiate his error.

Marston had, as already stated, departed on his mission, and before he made a formal offer of the Earl's hand to the ambitious mother, he communicated to her, without the slightest reservation, the pecuniary embarrass-

ments of Lord Ravenswood ; these, however, Mrs. Heathcote treated so lightly that the negotiation was soon terminated.

"You are aware, my dear sir ;" she said, with an exultation which she did not even attempt to disguise ; "that from the moment of her marriage Laura will come into possession of twelve thousand a-year under the Will of her father ; and now you must permit me to add, that it is by no means my intention that her income should be trammelled by the circumstances which you have just detailed to me. My own jointure is infinitely too large for my necessities, and I have consequently a considerable accumulation of money at my banker's, as well as elsewhere. Poor Mr. Heathcote died when Laura was a mere child ; and where thousands are economised yearly for such a length of time, the result is naturally an important one ; while, although I cannot, of course, undertake to liberate the Earl from all his encumbrances, I will at least pledge myself to settle this mortgage affair, as it is essential that Lord and Lady Ravenswood should at once regain possession of their ancestral home. Ravenswood Castle must therefore be rescued from the harpies who have a

lien on it, and the necessary funds shall be forthcoming whenever they may be required. The revenues of the estate must also be considerable, so that there is every reason to anticipate that some time hence my noble son-in-law will be reinvested in all his forfeited rights."

As the brow of the lady flushed, and her eye sparkled with excitement, her tortured listener became paler and more agitated every moment; he felt as the wretched mariner must feel when the friendly plank to which he has long clung for support is gliding from his hold: still, for Ferdinand, it had not yet quite drifted beyond his grasp, and with as steady a voice as he could command he replied:—

"I will communicate your generous intentions to his lordship, madam; and now I have only to acquaint you with one condition, on which he has desired me to declare that he positively insists before he will personally claim the hand of your daughter."

"A condition, Mr. Greville-Marston!" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, as the bloom deserted her cheek, and she moved uneasily upon her seat. "May I ask the nature of the condition which is to be so imperatively enforced?"

"Oh, fear nothing, madam;" said Ferdinand bitterly; "to so devoted a mother as yourself, and one who is prepared to make such colossal sacrifices to insure the happiness of her only child, it will be by no means difficult to concede. Lord Ravenswood simply requires to be convinced that Laura—that Miss Heathcote—willingly, aye, more than willingly—that she cheerfully accepts his hand, before he will consent to make her his wife."

"Nay, if that be all;" replied the lady, with a laugh that was slightly hysterical; "you have merely been endeavouring to alarm me with a new version of the mountain and the mouse. Laura has never had another will or another wish than mine; we have no secrets from each other; and when I tell her that my happiness depends upon this marriage, she will at once perceive that it must be the most desirable event in the world to secure her own."

"In that case," said Marston, as he rose to take his leave; "Miss Heathcote will probably consent to afford the Earl this assurance from her own lips?"

"Most certainly, whenever he may wish to receive it. It would be well, however, that

he should not see her to-day, as young ladies are always more or less agitated when marriage is for the first time proposed to them; and Laura is so very young."

"She *is* very young"—interposed Ferdinand emphatically.

"Still;" pursued Mrs. Heathcote, affecting not to regard the apostrophe; "girls become women so rapidly that she has already attained an age at which she is quite capable of judging for herself, as well as of performing all the highest and holiest duties of her sex. Were it otherwise, I trust you know me quite well enough to feel convinced that I would not consent to her contracting any marriage whatever."

"I am then to understand, am I not;" asked Marston, once more clutching at the moral plank which had been rapidly drifting from him; "that Miss Heathcote will be left entirely free to exercise her own discretion?"

"Most undoubtedly. Why should you imagine otherwise?"

"Believe me when I assure you that I have not presumed to form any theory upon the subject;" said Ferdinand; "although I was anxious to acquire the certainty that Lord Ravenswood, should he be happy enough to

make her his wife, would win no unwilling bride."

"I cannot understand your pertinacity on this point, Mr. Marston;" was the rejoinder of Mrs. Heathcote, as she bit her lips to conceal her annoyance.

"You forget," said her visitor with a constrained smile; "that I was especially desired to receive the assurance for which I have asked by the Earl himself."

"True; and your diplomacy has not been at fault. However, we now perfectly understand each other, and may quietly entrust all further preliminaries to the lawyers. I am deeply indebted to you, my young friend, and so is Laura, as I feel sure she will ere long confess."

"In that case, madam, I will leave you to communicate to your daughter the purport of my visit; which may, I ardently trust, tend to secure her happiness, whether she accept or reject the proposal of my noble friend."

"She will, I am sure, be grateful for your good wishes, Mr. Marston;" said the lady, rising in her turn; "and I will not lose a moment in informing her of the very kind interest which you feel in her welfare. Is her

friend Enna aware of what is about to take place?"

"I cannot say; I have not spoken to her upon the subject."

"In that case," said Mrs. Heathcote, extending her hand; "I hope that we have a pleasant surprise in store for her."

Ferdinand bowed and was gone, but the hall-door had scarcely closed upon him when Laura bounded into the room.

"My maid told me that Mr. Marston was here, mamma;" she said breathlessly, as her eyes wandered rapidly about her; "was she mistaken?"

"She was not, my dear girl; he has only this instant left me. But sit down, Laura, I have much to say to you."

"To me! about Mr. Marston?"

"Certainly, Mr. Marston is concerned in what I am about to confide to you;" replied her mother with a smile; "but I am going to speak principally about yourself."

Laura obediently took her place upon the sofa with a fluttering heart. Had Ferdinand spoken at last? And was she now about to understand the meaning of his late incomprehensible conduct? It must be so; and with

the glad confidence of youth she nestled her head upon her mother's bosom, and prepared to listen.

Meanwhile Mrs. Heathcote had fully decided on the course which she should pursue. She was aware that her child loved her tenderly and devotedly, but she also knew that she feared her in an equal degree ; while she was totally ignorant that for many months past Laura had become conscious that she was no longer a child, and that the fond but calm affection which she bore to her parent had somewhat paled before a passion as intense as it was absorbing.

That she should ever be opposed in her wishes had scarcely entered the mind of the ambitious mother as possible ; while upon one point she was decided, be the difficulties what they might ; and this was, that willingly or unwillingly, Laura should wear the coronet of a Countess. Lord Ravenswood was high born, high bred, in favour at court, and popular in the fashionable world, as no court-favourite can fail to be. What could any girl desire more ? The incompatibility of age was certainly a slight drawback, and in touching upon that fact Mrs. Heathcote felt that she must be extremely cautious ; but she

had such perfect faith in her own tact, and in her knowledge of her daughter's character, that this slight obstacle was rather exciting than otherwise.

"Well, dearest mother?" murmured the anxious girl, after the silence of a few seconds.

"Laura;" commenced Mrs. Heathcote, as she pressed her lips to the forehead of her daughter; "up to this very hour you have been the one thought and the one care of my existence. I have not opened my heart to another being upon earth, and you have given me reason to feel proud that I am your mother; but, however great may be the happiness I experience in seeing you constantly beside me, and in surrounding you with proofs of my love and my anxiety for your welfare, I can still, for your sake, compel myself to consent to our separation ——"

"Our separation, mamma! What can you mean? Why should we be separated?"

"Calm yourself, my dear child; the separation to which I allude is not what you seem to anticipate and to fear. There will be no actual estrangement between us; we shall see each other constantly—daily, should such be your desire. All that I am about to concede is to share the affection which has

hitherto been all my own, with another. I have promised the hand of my Laura to one who is in all respects worthy of her."

"*My* hand, mamma!" exclaimed her daughter, as a deep and burning blush suffused her cheeks and brow; "and to whom?"

"Listen to me attentively, Laura;" pursued Mrs. Heathcote, disregarding her emotion. "As regards fortune, I might have aspired for you to the most wealthy alliances in the land, but this I did not consider either necessary or desirable. You will be rich enough through your father and myself to be independent of all such considerations; but what I have desired for you has been a proud name, exalted rank, and a commanding title; and I have reason to believe that I have succeeded. At your age, and living as you have hitherto done in comparative seclusion, you cannot understand how greatly such advantages as these enhance the merits of every woman in the eyes of the world, but you will one day comprehend it. I know that your heart is free, and I rejoice to know it; for you may believe me when I tell you that what are vulgarly called 'love-matches,' very rarely result in happiness to either party."

"But, mamma;" gasped out Laura; "how

would it be possible to marry a man whom one did not love? A woman must be base, indeed, to go to the altar with vows upon her lips to which her heart made no response! As for myself, I am convinced that were I to try such an experiment, my indifference would soon grow into hatred."

"Not, my dear child;" said Mrs. Heathcote, calmly and firmly; "when you found that the husband who had been chosen for you was full of high and noble qualities; not when you reflected that you had done your duty as a loving and obedient daughter, anxious to prove to her doting mother that she could sacrifice a fantastic caprice to her better judgment; and that you had more faith in her good sense and knowledge of the world than in the love of the circulating libraries. In such a case the indifference (supposing it really to exist) would, as a natural consequence, be converted into respect and regard."

"No doubt you are right, mamma;" was the rejoinder; for Laura was unwilling to protract an argument which prevented her from ascertaining, without further delay, the name of the individual for whom she was destined.

"You will shortly appear in circles altogether novel to you, my darling;" continued Mrs. Heathcote; "but you are young, and will find no difficulty in accustoming yourself to the exigences of your new position. Lovely, rich, and noble, you will have nothing to desire, and all my wishes will be accomplished."

"You terrify me, mamma ——"

"Terrify you, simpleton! Why should you be terrified by such an assurance as this?"

"Because—because—but don't keep me any longer in suspense. Indeed, indeed, I cannot bear it!"

"Well, then, my own sweet child, you are about to become a peeress!"

"A peeress!" echoed the excited girl; "Has he—has—tell me the name of the husband to whom you would unite me?" and, for a moment, a wild hope flashed over the heart of Laura that Ferdinand had succeeded to a title.

"I will, pretty one! and I do so with pride and delight. It is the Earl of Ravenswood!"

There was no reply; the colour fled from the cheeks and lips of Miss Heathcote; her

eyelids drooped ; and before her mother could prevent it, she fell senseless to the floor !

“ Help ! help ! ” screamed the wretched woman, rushing to the bell, which she rang furiously. “ My child ! my darling is dying ! ”

Help was at hand ; the inanimate form was lifted and borne to a sofa, restoratives were applied, and ere long consciousness returned ; heavy tears coursed each other down the pallid cheeks, heavy sighs convulsed the labouring bosom, and convulsive shudderings shook the graceful limbs of the unhappy girl.

This first trial would have sufficed to discourage any spirit less determined than that of Mrs. Heathcote. That she devotedly loved her daughter is most certain ; but there was in her bosom a less holy feeling, which warred even against that deep and enduring love—the desire of vengeance upon her ungenerous and detested sister ; and, consequently, the short-sighted victim of her own vanity and revenge would not see in the sufferings of her child anything beyond a mere fainting-fit, induced by the shock of a surprise which would, beyond all doubt, have been equally great had the name of Lord Ravenswood never been uttered. Satisfied that Laura had formed

no other attachment, and that the idea of a separation from herself, coupled with a sense of terror at the new duties which must so suddenly devolve upon her when elevated to so high a rank, were sufficiently powerful to produce the painful scene through which she had just passed, she soothed and caressed her as she would have done a petted babe ; but she did not for a moment encourage her to confidence, or dream of foregoing her purpose.

CHAPTER XV.

DESPAIR.

It is extremely probable that, even had Mrs. Heathcote suspected the cause of the violent emotion exhibited by her daughter, she would have been equally firm ; for Ferdinand was not only unable by his social position to carry out the darling project which she had at heart for Laura, but, untitled as he was, she could not through his means humble the arrogance and excite the envy of Lady Willoughby. While, moreover, the recollection of the forged papers, despite all the assurances which she had given him to the contrary, was ever present to her mind. Her moral nature was not sufficiently elevated to enable her to feel that crime is not an hereditary disease ; but even as Laura had inherited the wealth of her father, so did she al-

most persuade herself that Ferdinand must have succeeded to the sin of his.

There is more moral insanity in the world than we poor human beings are willing to admit.

Determined as she was, however, Mrs. Heathcote had been considerably discomfited by the sudden indisposition of her daughter; which, as the poor girl made no effort to rally, but rather yielded to its prostrating effects, in order that she might, in the solitude of her own chamber, indulge unchidden in her sorrow, confined her to her bed for many days; and it was not, consequently, before the lapse of a fortnight, that the pertinacious and self-deceiving mother ventured to recur to the subject.

Laura had, for the first time, descended to the drawing-room, where, pale, and crushed, and silent, she lay stretched upon a sofa; when, summoning all her courage to her aid, Mrs. Heathcote looked up with a smile from the book upon which she had affected to be engaged, and said soothingly:—

“I am so rejoiced to see you beside me again, my own Laura. I have missed you sadly since you have been an invalid; but I trust that we shall have no recurrence of such

a misfortune. I should have thought, my child, that you had stronger nerves ; for, after all, the prospect of a coronet is not so very terrible ; while, on the other hand, it need not have caused so much surprise, for with your beauty and your fortune ——”

“ I never thought once upon the subject, mamma ;” murmured the dejected girl, who had, during her hours of seclusion, resolved that whenever her mother should again mention her ill-omened marriage she would control her feelings, and hear her to an end, before she definitively and absolutely refused to accede to it.

“ Then it was a mere girlish weakness, my darling, was it not ?” asked her mother, as she kissed her pale cheek. “ I thought as much ; for I could not bear to believe that I should be disappointed in you, and that you had, indeed, in point of fact, resolved to disappoint us *all*. I am so glad to be undeceived, and to have it in my power to deceive Mr. Greville-Marston, who has only this moment left the house.”

“ What brought him here, mamma ?” demanded Laura, suddenly rousing herself into interest.

"He came, my love, in the first place, to inquire after your health; and in the next, to ask a decided answer to the proposals of the Earl."

"Mr Greville-Marston did you say, mamma?"

"Yes, my child, Lord Ravenswood's young friend, who has been most anxious for the success of his guardian's suit; and by whom I cannot doubt for a moment that he was first induced to seek your hand."

"Mr. Greville-Marston!" repeated her daughter, in an accent of incredulity and astonishment.

"Himself, dearest! He has, as I said, only this moment left me. I am sorry that he was so pressed for time, as I should have been glad to convince you how zealous he has been in our cause, and how deeply indebted we must ever feel for his devotion to our interests. He is really a very superior young man, and well worthy alike of the affection of the Earl and the devoted attachment of his sister."

"And he is really anxious for this marriage, mamma? And you think that he induced Lord Ravenswood to propose it?"

"I know it, Laura; and it proves at once his judgment and his kind feeling. There *are* circumstances which will render an union with you highly desirable for our noble friend; while as regards ourselves ——"

"Say not a word more, mother: I will obey you. I will marry Lord Ravenswood——" faltered out the heart-stricken girl, as a gush of large cold tears fell heavily upon her bosom.

"Of course you will, my own one;" was the unsympathetic rejoinder. "No woman in her senses could refuse so eligible an establishment; and so far from regretting that the Earl is not a wealthier man, I am rejoiced that *my* daughter will have it in her power to meet him on equal ground. I do not wonder that you weep, Laura; it is natural and womanly that you should do so, and I love you the better for the delicacy of your feelings. Kiss me, my darling; you have made me very, very happy; while I am proudly conscious that in my happiness I have secured your own."

"Oh, yes;" murmured her victim, whose heavy sobs rendered her voice almost inarticulate. "No doubt—no doubt—I shall also be very, very happy."

"Wayward girl!" said Mrs. Heathcote, as she passed her hand exultingly over the luxuriant masses of her daughter's magnificent hair; "who ever saw worldly prosperity welcomed so moodily? There will be no tears in those bright eyes, Laura; no gloom upon that fair young brow, when it is encircled by a coronet. No, no, my lovely Countess, we shall be all smiles then; and my Lady Willoughby will learn that others, greater and more noble than herself, can bend their stubborn necks before the daughter of her sister's husband!"

Laura only buried her face in her cushions, and wept.

"You must really rouse yourself, my dear child;" pursued her mother; "for the Earl, weary of waiting so long for your reply, and uneasy at the unfavourable reports which he has daily heard of your health, has urgently solicited an interview with you; and I have pledged myself to Mr. Marston that you would receive him in the course of the day."

"To-day, mamma? Oh! surely not to-day!"

"And why? When the first interview is once over you will be quite yourself again."

"And did you tell Mr. Marston that I would see him to-day?"

"Really, Laura, you are incomprehensible! Mr. Marston merely came to urge me to effect a meeting between yourself and Lord Ravenswood. He said that it would be desirable for it to take place at once, and I perfectly agreed with him. On occasions of this kind ——"

"You are right, mamma, quite right; and so is Mr. Marston. I am better now, much better; but my illness has unnerved me. I am perfectly ready to receive Lord Ravenswood."

"That's a dear girl! but endeavour, like a darling, to look a little less scared and languid. I scarcely know my brilliant Laura with those dim eyes and those pallid cheeks."

"I shall be better presently, mamma, when — when all is over."

"Try to compose yourself, silly one;" said her mother; "and now I will leave you to rest for an hour, for so much talking exhausts you."

"Ferdinand! Ferdinand!" gasped out the poor girl, when she once more found herself alone; "can this indeed be true? Have you

coldly flung me into the arms of another, after all your professions of attachment—all your demonstrations of regard? Why did you tell me that you loved me, only to make me the victim of your vanity and the dupe of your falsehood? Did I deserve this at your hands? I, who believed that earth did not hold a being so perfect as yourself! And why, not content with your own perjury, do you now force me to become the wife of a man who can never be to my heart more than a stranger, and whom I cannot even solace myself by hating? I could have sacrificed myself for your happiness; I should have gloried in so doing. With *you* I could have welcomed sorrow, poverty, and suffering, without a murmur; but you have coldly cast away my affection, and on your head be the penalty of your crime. I shall not die; I feel that I shall not die: I am too young, and life is too strong within me, or I could lay down my head, glad to feel that its next resting-place would be the grave. But there is a moral death—a lingering, hopeless, reckless death, which has no solace here, no hope hereafter—and to this you have condemned me. My whole life will be a lie. I shall utter vows

false and faithless as your own heart; and you will have whispered them in my ear—dictated them to my lips. You, whom I loved—whom I trusted. But for you I would have refused to barter my truth for an idle name—my self-respect for greatness; I would have clung to you through every trial, and through every suffering. All is over now; I shall be what you have made me.” And, convulsed with agony, the miserable girl sank back exhausted by the violence of her feelings.

“My daughter will be a peeress!” proudly whispered Mrs. Heathcote to herself, as she sought her own room. “My sister will be humbled; and I shall not have lived in vain.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.

POOR Ferdinand! He had hoped and believed, as he left the house of her whom he so devotedly loved, and whom he had so hopelessly lost, that his most painful trial was now over. "I will leave England," he murmured; "the very moment that I have ascertained the result of the coming interview. My duty is accomplished; my sacrifice will be completed should Laura indeed consent to become the wife of Lord Ravenswood. But surely she cannot do this! If she did not deceive me by the hollow blandishments of a coquette she will never consent to perjure herself for rank—to give herself in her young beauty to a man old enough to be her father—to sell herself to an empty, hollow ambition. *She* has no vow to bind her like that by which I am thrall'd; she has no father's

crime to expiate; she is free to follow the dictates of her own heart; she must, she *does* know, that by complying with the selfish wishes of her mother she will condemn me to life-long wretchedness, and estrange me from my best and truest friend: for I cannot, dare not, attempt to look upon her when she has become his wife; it would kill me to see her smile upon him as she once smiled upon me. No: the world is wide, and I must put that world between us. But I will *not* despair. Laura cannot be compelled to barter her truth for a coronet; and should she refuse—should she remain true to me——Yet how can I dare to hope it? Has she not already consented to receive the formal visit of her noble suitor, when she might have spared both herself and him the pain of an interview which was to end only in mortification to the Earl and in disappointment to her mother? Would she have subjected me to this bitter, this maddening suspense? It is vain and idle to entertain such an idea! As well might I hope to forget her.”

Never once, while reflecting thus, did Marston remember how little the part which he had lately played in this domestic drama

could tend to convince Laura of the sincerity of his attachment, nor how much cause he had himself given her to doubt it. Had he not voluntarily undertaken to unite her with another? Had he not perseveringly forced upon his benefactor the necessity and eligibility of a marriage which was repulsive to his sense of propriety and fitness? Had he not, in fact, made her go through the medium through which he led her to degrade and debase her better nature? No; he forgot that Miss Heathcote was altogether ignorant of the fatal circumstance which had thrown him, bound hand and foot, into the power of her mother, and that she could only estimate his conduct by plain and damning facts, by all of which he was condemned. Had he dwelt upon these considerations, he must have felt that the pride of the poor girl, thus suddenly and cruelly abandoned, would give her strength to abandon him in her turn, however deeply she might regret his falsehood. What could he be in her eyes but a heartless coxcomb, who had trifled with her affections, and made a mock of her credulity?

Could they have met alone, though only for a few brief moments, how much after-

anguish, how much remorse, might have been spared to both ! but this was not to be. How many hearts that have been broken by the world, and the world's vices, might have retained their purity and peace, had those in whose breasts they beat been true to themselves, discarded doubt, and refused to believe the beloved one to be guilty, without full and ample proof !

Here were two young lives blighted, when a look or a word glanced or uttered in confidence and affection would have saved them both ; neither Laura nor Ferdinand could ever love again, for she had lost her faith in human nature, and he had so wound up his being in that of the fair girl who had first taught him the bliss of living for her sake, that his heart was closed for ever against the allurements of any other passion.

With throbbing pulses, and eyes heavy with tears, Miss Heathcote awaited the arrival of the Earl, but her thoughts were not with him. Even now, at the very moment which must prove the turning-point of her life, although she had just accused him of having sacrificed her to his own vanity, and convinced herself that it would henceforward be

her duty to regard him with contempt and abhorrence, she was still seeking to exonerate Ferdinand in her own eyes ; and to persuade herself that, even while circumstances apparently condemned him, he might still be blameless. But she failed in the attempt. Poor, he had professed to love her ; suddenly enriched, he had forsaken her : the baseness of his conduct was too evident, and even passion paled before disgust and indignation. Her pride was humbled ; her feelings outraged. What mattered it now what her destiny might be ? Her sole remaining duty was obedience to her mother ; and, bitter as was the task enforced by that duty, she would perform it. Her heart was bursting, but her will was strong. He should not think that he could so readily cast her off, and that she was weak enough to weep over his loss.

Poor Laura ! she overrated her strength. Love is like the banian, which, wrenched from the earth in one direction, only drives its fibres deeper into the soil, and roots itself more firmly in another.

As the hour approached which the Earl had appointed for his visit to Mrs. Heathcote and her daughter, his restless irritation became

painful, while the agitation of Marston grew into positive torture; and we need scarcely say how his sufferings, bitter as they were from apprehension and suspense, were augmented when Lord Ravenswood, entering the room in which he was seated with his sister (vainly endeavouring to persuade her that he never was more happy or more tranquil as to the future since his boyhood), said abruptly, and with a nervous trepidation altogether foreign to his usual manner:—

“Now then, my dear children, we will pay our visit. Are you ready?”

“Ready, my lord? What visit are we about to pay?” asked Enna, looking up inquiringly.

“Has not Ferdinand told you, then?” was the answering inquiry.

“He has told me nothing.”

“We are going to call upon Mrs. Heathcote.”

“Oh, if that is all, I will not detain you a moment;” smiled Miss Greville, throwing down the pen with which she had been busily engaged in copying some music. “I am so very happy to hear that we are once more to enter that house as we used to do, a

real family party, that I will show you how rapidly a woman can tie on her bonnet, despite all the sarcasms of your sarcastic sex." And as she ceased speaking she disappeared.

Ferdinand, meanwhile, who had been hitherto languidly leaning against his sister's harp, started from his inert position and said hurriedly :—

"I trust that you will excuse me, Lord Ravenswood. Enna will be only too happy to accompany you ; but I have just received a summons from my solicitor which I am anxious to obey ; and as my presence ——"

"Your presence, my dear boy, is indispensable ;" was the equally hasty rejoinder of the Earl. "You are quite aware that I placed myself in your hands, and you must not fail me at such a moment as this. The part which I have to play is uncongenial to my nature and to my age, and I shall require your assistance in order to do justice to myself."

"But really, my lord ——"

"What am I to understand?" asked Lord Ravenswood ; "Do you shrink from the responsibility which you have voluntarily

assumed? Have you some unacknowledged motive for thus withdrawing yourself at the very period when I most require your support?"

"Motive?" echoed the agonized young man. "Oh, no; I can, of course, have no motive, except that of ——"

"All false delicacy is out of the question, Ferdinand;" said Lord Ravenswood; "Mrs. Heathcote has naturally informed her daughter of the active part which you have taken in bringing about this marriage; and Laura must consequently be prepared to receive you, my adopted son, with as much welcome as myself, should she indeed voluntarily consent to become my wife, as you have assured me that she will do. The sooner, therefore, that all the wearisome and ceremonious details of the affair are over the better. By the way, have you told Enna the purpose of our visit?"

"I have told her nothing."

"I am sorry for it;" said the Earl; "you *should* have done so. However, it is now too late to enter into all the necessary explanations, as the carriage will be at the door by the time she is ready."

“One moment, my lord, and I will be ready also;” was the reply of Marston, as he hastened from the room.

When he reached the library he supported himself for a few instants against the table. Yes, Mrs. Heathcote had no doubt apprised her daughter of the treacherous part that he had already played; but Laura might still have doubted, had he not forced his unblushing falsehood upon her at a moment when every sense of delicacy should have compelled his absence. How base, how worthless, was he about to appear in her eyes! What could be done? He seized a sheet of blank paper, folded and enclosed it in an envelope, and then, summoning a servant, he said, with as much composure as he could assume, while he wrote his own address upon the supposed letter:—

“I am about, Jackson, to accompany his lordship and my sister to Mrs. Heathcote’s; but as I have a pressing business engagement, be good enough to let this follow me in half an hour, in order that my abrupt departure may not excite surprise. You will not forget it?”

“I will not, sir.”

“And now farewell, not only hope, but self-respect;” murmured Marston to himself, as the man disappeared. “I have become the creature of deceit and subterfuge in my own eyes, and in those of Laura I shall be a wretch who has disgraced his manhood and glories in his shame. Well, be it so; my destiny is decided. I can make my poor Enna happy, and then I will abandon all. Love!—pshaw! What has love been to me? Torture and suffering. Country!—I have no country; the very earth upon which I tread seems to fail beneath my feet. What matters it where I drag out a blighted existence? Ha! there is the carriage; the bridegroom is impatient; his bride is awaiting him. His bride! My Laura, whom I had wooed and won—my own, who now is his! It is unnatural—it is maddening; and I am to be compelled to look upon their smiles, to hear their whispered words of endearment. Oh, my father! at what a frightful price have I redeemed your honour!”

“My lord is waiting, sir.”

“I am coming instantly;” said Marston, startled out of his painful reverie, and clutching his hat with a convulsive force which almost

made his fingers meet through the beaver. "Yes," he muttered, as he turned to leave the room, "I am coming. Another half hour, and I shall have signed the death-warrant of all my hopes!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRUGGLE.

WHEN Lord Ravenswood and his companions were ushered into the drawing-room of Mrs. Heathcote it was, evidently to her annoyance, filled with visitors, to whom the arrival of the Earl was a welcome incident, as they had fluttered about the sofa of the invalid with a simulated regret and sympathy which had begun to grow wearisome to her. In an instant Enna was beside her friend, but she uttered no lamentations, indulged in no elaborated condolences. A silent pressure of the hand, and an anxious glance at the wasted cheek, now paler than marble; and at the tear-laden and downcast eyes, was all the greeting that she offered; but it was enough; when suddenly that pale cheek flushed, and that hitherto-nerveless hand quivered in her

grasp. Ferdinand had approached the sofa in his turn.

"I am deeply grieved, Miss Heathcote;" he began, when suddenly Laura raised her drooping head, and a scornful light flashed in her eyes as the one word "Sir?" broke disdainfully from her lips.

Marston was silent; and retreating a few paces, flung himself into a chair.

This little scene had been concealed from the visitors by the stately form of Mrs. Heathcote, who had risen from her seat to welcome the Earl, and still stood beside him.

"You are right, unfortunately, my lord;" she said blandly; "Laura *does* look ill: but it is a mere nervous attack, which will soon be conquered. In my time young ladies were not troubled with nervous attacks. My darling, Lord Ravenswood is kind enough to express his regret at your little indisposition."

"You are very good;" said the invalid, raising herself upon her cushions, and forcing a smile as she resolutely extended her hand; "I really feel quite unworthy of so much sympathy. A little rest, and a little fresh air ——"

"Of course, of course; you will be quite

well in a few hours ;” interposed her mother ; “and, really, after all, your lordship must admit that in her case a slight illness is not altogether unbecoming.”

Well might she say so, for, crushed and heartbroken as she was, the beauty of Miss Heathcote was something almost spirit-like ; her large and lustrous eyes gleamed like stars, her bloodless brow wore the tint of alabaster, and her languid form was statuesque in its faultless proportions ; while the soft white wrapping dress, which fell in light folds about her, gave a childlike effect to her whole appearance, which more than ever reminded the Earl of a fact that he would willingly have forgotten.

Enna, meanwhile, was suffering under a vague sensation of alarm and bewilderment, which became every moment more painful. The whole scene was mysterious to her. Why had Laura so imperiously withdrawn from the greeting of her brother ? Did they love each other no longer ? Why had she so warmly welcomed the Earl, while she had not uttered a single word to herself ? What could it mean ?

At this instant some of the visitors rose to

depart; and ere long all had taken their leave, save Lord Ravenswood and his party. After having exerted herself to receive the Earl, the invalid had again sunk back; the lids had fallen over her eyes, and the long dark lashes rested upon her cheeks. One miniature hand still grasped that of Miss Greville, while the other pillowed her head, and was buried amid her luxuriant hair. Poor girl! she was steeped to the very lips in anguish. What could bring Ferdinand to her mother's house at such a moment? Was he there to insult her misery, and to gloat over his own triumph? Was he utterly heartless, or shamelessly regardless of her feelings? Little could she estimate the torture which he was even then undergoing, with the stern endurance of a martyr at the stake, for she knew nothing of the circumstances which had compelled him thus to sacrifice all the best and holiest impulses of his nature. And yet, had she ventured to trust herself with one glance at his convulsed features, compressed lips, and constrained attitude, she might have read at least a portion of his secret, and *that* the very portion for which she panted.

With that perfect good breeding and

knowledge of the world for which he was conspicuous, Lord Ravenswood no sooner found himself relieved from the presence of strangers than he moved to a seat near the invalid, with whom he entered into one of those futile, but agreeable conversations, which permit a host of courteous things to be said without for a moment startling the listener; and either unconsciously, or by a firm effort of will, Laura found herself instinctively interested, when Mrs. Heathcote, who became impatient to exchange these commonplaces for something more definite and conclusive, suddenly began to expatiate upon the gratification which she felt at the honour which the Earl had conferred upon her daughter by the offer of his hand; and to express her deep sense of obligation to Mr. Marston, whose anxiety for the happiness of her darling had, as she declared, earned her everlasting gratitude.

Miss Greville looked up in wonder, but she did not attempt to utter a syllable. She was more and more bewildered by all that she saw and heard passing about her.

The position of the whole party at this abrupt outbreak was pitiable; for while the lady herself was radiant with exultation and

self-gratulation, Enna sat speechless, Laura was struggling to force back her tears, and Lord Ravenswood, half suspicious of the truth, was ill at ease, as he felt himself to be in a false and almost absurd position. As to Ferdinand, his brain appeared to burn, and every object around him to revolve; he could see nothing clearly, he could hear nothing distinctly; the wild chaos which we are told riots in and about a drowning man can alone typify his sensations.

“Will this torture never end?” he asked, as he sat with a stereotyped smile upon his lips, and a cold gnawing at his heart.

It did. Scarcely a moment had elapsed when the letter which he had prepared was placed in his hand; and hurriedly pretexting an imperative summons which compelled his immediate attention, he hastily took his leave, without another glance at her in whom his whole existence was bound up.

Was Laura happier as she saw him depart? Surely she should have been so after arguing herself into the conviction that his presence under such circumstances was an insult; and yet this was far from being the case. Unconsciously she had felt that pre-

sence support and strengthen her ; she could not reconcile it to herself that anything conclusive could be said, that anything decided could be arranged, while he was by to assert a prior claim to her love, and to insist on her fulfilling her voluntary pledge ; and thus, when she saw the door close behind him, she was overwhelmed by a sense of utter isolation and helplessness. Had Ferdinand only advanced his claim to her affections—his right to demand her hand—she too would have braved alike the displeasure of her mother and the indignation of the Earl ; but no, he had coldly abandoned her to her fate, and nothing was now left to her but to submit.

Her apprehensions were correct ; the presence of Marston had indeed exercised an involuntary restraint over the Earl, who, after having acted as the mentor of his adopted son during five-and-twenty years, found it extremely difficult to exhibit himself before him in the onerous position of the antiquated suitor of a young and beautiful girl ; but no sooner had his ward disappeared than, gently taking the hand of Miss Heathcote, Lord Ravenswood said in a subdued voice, and with an earnest manner which at once convinced his listeners

that they were no unimportant words he was about to utter :—

“You will perhaps think, my dear young lady, that experience should by this time have taught me wisdom ; and have convinced me that, although my own feelings might become deeply interested by the purehearted and lovely of your sex, I could scarcely hope that those feelings would meet with a response. I am, I acknowledge, of the same opinion ; and yet, even after this confession, I am compelled to admit that I could not resist the temptation of convincing myself that the hopes which your mother has been so flattering as to hold out to me might possibly be fulfilled. It now remains for you to ratify or to negative those hopes.”

“I confidently assure your lordship ;” interposed Mrs. Heathcote ; “that both my daughter and myself fully appreciate the honour ——”

“One moment, madam ;” pursued the Earl gravely ; “I am aware, fully aware, of the kind interest which prompts you to assure me that my suit is acceptable to your charming daughter ; but I must request you, as a favour, to permit her to answer the questions

which I shall take the liberty of putting to her, with her own lips. Be influenced by no impulse but that of truth, I intreat of you, my dear Miss Heathcote; have no regard for my feelings; as, should I have suffered myself to be misled, I shall deserve no such consideration. Do you feel the slightest repugnance to becoming my wife?"

"I refer everything to my mother, my lord;" murmured the young lady; "I know that she has always been anxious to insure my happiness, and I am ready to abide by her decision."

"Your reply is honourable to you, Miss Heathcote, as a daughter;" said the Earl impressively; "but it is, nevertheless, far from satisfactory to me, as it savours more of resignation than of free will."

"My *dear* Lord Ravenswood;" again interposed Mrs. Heathcote; "How strangely you misunderstand Laura! Believe me when I assure you that there is no resignation in the case. How, indeed, could such a thing be possible when she is well aware ——"

"You are failing in our conditions, madam;" was the rejoinder: "allow me to comprehend without mistake my position as

regards your daughter. I can offer to you, Miss Heathcote, the affectionate interest of a sincere friend, and the zealous protection of a tender father ; more I will not say, as I have no inclination to mislead you by promises which it might not perhaps be hereafter in my power to fulfil. I am quite aware that at your age, and with your personal advantages, you have a right to look for more, much more ; but although I may disappoint, I will never wilfully deceive you. If you feel that you can trust to my affection, and that it will suffice to your happiness, rest assured that it will at least be firm and unalterable."

"What could any reasonable woman require more?" inquired the elder lady, striving to conceal her impatience under a smile.

"Remember, my dear girl ;" pursued Lord Ravenswood, disregarding the interruption ; "that you have, in all human probability, a long and brilliant future to anticipate, full of new impressions, new enjoyments, and new hopes, while that which remains to me must necessarily be peopled rather by memories than by yearnings after the novel, and, at my age, the unattainable ; memories, moreover, of so far-reaching a past that they are gradually

fading from my mind. As I look back I can dwell upon as much as you will do in looking forward. This is a grave consideration ; and I should be wanting in self-respect did I not place it fairly before you. You will think me a strange wooer, Miss Heathcote, but I must be just both to you and to myself. In accepting my hand you will make a serious sacrifice ; unless, indeed, and that I dare scarcely to hope, you do so in the firm faith that —— In short, the disparity of age between us convinces me that there must exist a decided difference of tastes, habits, and feelings ; you are only beginning a life which I have nearly exhausted. You are very young, and it is natural that a wife should be proud of the husband of her choice. Are you ready to forego so legitimate and praiseworthy a vanity ?”

“ Surely, my lord ——”

“ One moment more, madam ;” persisted the Earl ; “ and I will no longer fatigue Miss Heathcote by my apparent sententiousness ; but it would render me worthless in my own eyes were I not to prepare your daughter for the disappointments to which she may be exposed in becoming the wife of a man so much

her senior in years. Reflect, my sweet girl : would it not cost you a painful effort were some stranger whom you casually encountered in society to inquire of you if I were your father, to answer cheerfully and without a pang of regret, ' He is my husband ? ' Put this question to yourself. All that I can offer in exchange for your youth and beauty are an honest heart, an upright conscience, high rank, and a name which has never been sullied by dishonour. These are my sole claims to your favour ; and with your personal and worldly advantages you may command them all in a younger and more brilliant husband than myself. Reflect, therefore, I repeat, before you pledge yourself to a destiny at which you may hereafter be led to repine."

The words and manner of the Earl were so gentle, so full of self-abnegation and generous consideration, that it was impossible to listen to them unmoved, or to remain insensible to the noble simplicity and dignified absence of self-appreciation which they revealed.

But Laura continued silent.

" Am I to interpret your silence as consent ? " at length asked Lord Ravenswood.

"Of course, of course, my dear lord;" exclaimed her mother eagerly.

"It is for *you* to decide, Miss Heathcote;" said the Earl gravely, as he took her hand; "and by that decision, be it what it may, I shall abide."

Laura burst into tears.

"Upon my honour;" said Mrs. Heathcote with an uneasy laugh, and moving as she spoke to the back of the sofa upon which the invalid was lying; "a young girl's tears fall as freely as a summer rain, even when a bright sun is shining overhead. You must forgive this childishness, my dear lord. They are all alike, I find, on such occasions as this; though I confess I did flatter myself that *my* daughter would have been superior to such weakness. Laura;" she whispered hoarsely in the ear of the poor girl, while affecting to arrange her cushions; "I insist upon your drying your eyes instantly."

Lord Ravenswood rose proudly—almost haughtily—from his seat. Despite all his assurances he was still human, and he was most deeply mortified. The heart of Enna beat tumultuously, as she clasped the hand which the Earl had coldly resigned; and

again the low hoarse whisper fell upon the ear of Laura.

"Beware!" Then passing her perfumed handkerchief caressingly over the brow of her almost fainting daughter, Mrs. Heathcote said blandly: "Speak, my child; his Lordship awaits your answer."

"I will obey you, mamma;" sobbed out the poor girl.

"Do not mistake me, madam;" said the Earl; "I will accept no victim at your hands. You are well aware that when I approached Miss Heathcote as a suitor, I did so at your own instigation; and in the full assurance, also given by yourself, that my pretensions were not disagreeable or unwelcome to the young lady, whose feelings I have, as it would appear, most involuntarily wounded. She will, I trust, be generous enough to pardon an offence so unconsciously committed; and now, with your permission, I will take my leave."

"Do you brave me, unnatural girl?" murmured the deep and constrained voice once more, as the hand of Mrs. Heathcote fell heavily upon the arm of her daughter.

A sudden terror thrilled through the veins of Laura. What had she not to fear, when

no longer protected by the presence of the Earl? She languidly raised her head, and as her gaze suddenly fastened upon the empty chair so recently occupied by Ferdinand—by Ferdinand, who had deceived and abandoned her—nay more, who had wilfully subjected her to this frightful persecution, her resolution was at once taken.

“You have mistaken alike my silence and my emotion, Lord Ravenswood;” she said, in a steady voice; “my mother has not misled you. I am ready and willing to become your wife; and feel honoured by the good opinion which you have formed of me, and which, I trust, never to forfeit.”

“I was not deceived in you, Laura;” exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, radiant with delight; “I could always read your heart.”

The Earl did not, however, appear by any means convinced of the sincerity of the assurance which he had just received.

“Are you quite sure, Miss Heathcote;” he asked doubtfully; “that you are not at this moment deceiving alike yourself and me? I will not consent to expose myself to the risk of your after-repentance.”

“Have you no faith in my truthfulness?”

demanded the half-maddened girl in her turn. "Hear me then, Lord Ravenswood, while I declare, that if I do not become your bride I will give my hand to no other man on earth."

"Then, Laura, I am to understand;" said the Earl almost sadly; "that you will be mine by your own free will, and without coercion of any kind?"

Laura bowed her head upon his proffered hand; he touched her brow lightly and reverently with his lips; and then, with a mute summoning to Miss Greville to follow him, he bent low before Mrs. Heathcote and left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FAMILY SKETCH.

WHILE this painful scene was enacting in Grosvenor Street, one equally stormy was taking place in Bryanston Square. As we have already stated, Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby almost idolised their selfish and worldly son; but although the affectionate forbearance of a mother is perhaps exhaustless, such is far from being universally the case with a father.

The Baronet had been the youngest of three brothers; and had, accordingly, gathered up a few tares during his youth, while his more fortunate brothers were pampered upon the wheat of the estate. While they were rowing, boating, and boxing at Cambridge, he was consigned to the care of a country rector, whose narrow stipend and four grown-up daughters rendered a small addition to his

limited income by no means unwelcome ; even burthened as it was with the charge of a wrong-headed, unruly boy, whose previous education had been almost entirely derived from the scanty stores of the deaf school-master, who reigned supreme over the rising generation of the small village near his father's place, varied by the choice vocabularies of the stable-yard and the servants' offices.

Marmaduke was, in short, the pariah of the family, and left to scramble through life as he pleased until he had reached his twelfth year ; when, rather for decency's sake than from any actual interest in his welfare, he was transferred to Tiverton Rectory, to amaze the Rev. Mr. Holloway by his surpassing ignorance and unblushing assurance, and to harass his poor, meek, inoffensive daughters by his mischievous propensities.

Ponsonby would inherit the estate, while Lionel had two livings at nurse ready for him when he should be duly qualified to supersede their temporary incumbents. The Church is always an eligible provision for the second sons of wealthy landholders, who are anxious to preserve their revenues intact, and to bequeath them *en-masse* to the representative

of the family. But what was to be done with Marmaduke? To be frank with the reader, this was a question very rarely, and always very coldly, discussed between the Baronet and his wife. It would be time enough to decide, they argued, when he left school—a younger son is always a nonentity under such circumstances—and so year succeeded year, and the boy grew into a tall stripling, and the stripling was rapidly becoming aware that he could amuse himself much more agreeably than in yawning over the Latin Grammar, and teasing the four long-suffering daughters of his tutor, when a sudden summons home gave a new turn to his ideas and projects.

Ponsonby, the pride and hope of the house, had received so severe an injury by a fall from his horse while hunting, that he never rallied, and had become a confirmed invalid, whose life hung upon a thread. Symptoms of consumption had indeed already betrayed themselves, and all chance of his succession to the family honours was at an end.

Under these circumstances it was evident, according to all seeming, that Lionel, his quasi-clerical brother, would one day reign in

his stead; and, consequently, nothing could be more simple than that the exiled Marmaduke should be recalled to the Hall, and forthwith instructed to prepare himself to replace Lionel as Rector of Bridletown and Vicar of Greenhill.

The unruly boy had, however, grown into the resolute youth; and insist as he might, the irritated Baronet found it impossible to compel him to acquiesce in this substitution. He had now escaped the trammels of private tutorship, and he at once determined that he would not submit to those of College.

"What did you intend to make of me, sir?" he asked quietly; "if this misfortune had not happened to Ponsonby?"

"I scarcely know;" was the equally composed reply; "but I suppose that I should have purchased you a commission in the army."

"A wise decision!" said his son; "and one that I should advise you still to carry out, as that is the career upon which I have already decided."

"Upon which *you* have decided!" exclaimed the astonished old gentleman.

"Precisely! As no one appeared to

think for me, I have learnt to think for myself. Neither my tastes, my habits, nor my acquirements fit me for the Church; and like a worthy Yorkshire farmer of my acquaintance, I have no respect for pleurisies."

"For *what*, sir?" demanded the enraged Baronet, perfectly petrified by the calm self-assertion of his last-born.

"For pleurisies, Sir Ponsonby. He is a very sensible man, that friend of mine, I can assure you; and he says that what he particularly objects to in our Church Establishment is, that the working clergy are left to starve, while all men of family and influence are hooded and stalled, and become pleurisies."

"How dare you jest upon such a subject, sir?"

"I do *not* jest;" was the careless rejoinder; "and you may rely upon it that it is no joke to the sufferers. I am a tolerable judge of that subject at least, having for several years been in a position to sympathise, much more than was at all agreeable, in the privations of one hard-worked and ill-fed parson."

"But I do not intend you to be either hard-worked or ill-fed;" shouted his exasperated father.

“Nor do I; and, consequently, my mind is made up as to my future career. If I had been reared and educated like my brothers, I might have felt differently; but, being a stranger in my father’s house, I have no home-worship to render the prospect of a still longer exile distasteful to me. Take my advice, sir, and procure the contemplated commission at once. Do not be afraid that I shall do any discredit to the family.”

“I shall do no such thing, young gentleman.”

“As you please, sir! In that case I shall most certainly enlist.”

“If you so disgrace your name I will discard you!” bellowed the Baronet.

“Nay, nay, that is an empty threat;” was the bold retort of the fearless youth; “for have you not done that for years?”

Sir Ponsonby sank back in his chair, fairly conquered. The spirit of his son was decidedly not a clerical one, and the commission was purchased.

Marmaduke Willoughby became a brave man, and an excellent officer. He served for several years in India, and was twice mentioned in the despatches; but his military

career was not destined to be a long one. His brother Ponsonby had not survived his own departure from England more than a few months, when the two family livings had been bestowed upon a distant cousin, who evinced no reluctance whatever to exchange present poverty for the future loaves and fishes of a pluralist; and who consequently contrived, with the pecuniary assistance of the Baronet, to obtain his degree at Oxford in a marvelously short space of time, and with considerable credit to himself. Lionel was established at the Hall, as the inheritor of its honours; and all once more fell into its usual calm and quiet course, when, on a certain dark November morning, while Lady Willoughby and her son were awaiting the arrival of her husband in the breakfast-room, his man-servant entered hurriedly, and in an accent of dismay, which accorded perfectly with the terrified expression of his pale and ghastly face, announced, without preface or preparation, that Sir Ponsonby, having incautiously gone to his medicine-chest himself to look for a liquid drug of which he was frequently in the habit of making use, had, probably in a fit of abstraction, taken out the wrong vial, and swallowed a large quantity of laudanum.

Medical aid was hastily summoned: but before the three miles which the Esculapius of the post-town was compelled to travel in order to reach the Hall were accomplished, Sir Ponsonby had breathed his last, and Lionel Willoughby had succeeded to his inheritance.

Hitherto, the new Baronet had been remarkable for nothing particular, save perhaps an unusually flexible disposition. He never differed from any one, and the word of his father was universally his law. He was soft-eyed, and low-voiced; but it was singular that, gentle and yielding as we have described him, he nevertheless, by some occult means, contrived to carry out his own will and pleasure in everything, even while his parents were congratulating themselves upon his docility and respect for their authority.

"So unlike that wretched boy Marmaduke;" they declared; "who had no more reverence for his parents than if he had never had any!"

Alas, for poor Lady Willoughby! 'A change came o'er the spirit of (her) dream,' when this pattern son became undisputed master of the ancient halls and broad acres of his ancestors. Her jointure was grudg-

ingly paid; her presence in the house, which had so long been her home, evidently distasteful; and yet, of what could she complain? Sir Lionel had never addressed to her one disrespectful word; had never been guilty of one uncourteous action. He was, on the contrary, always calm and placid; too calm and too placid to satisfy the heart of a mother. He occasionally almost appeared to ignore her existence; and there was a covert sarcasm in his tone when, at rather rare intervals, she ventured to enter into conversation with him, which stung her to the quick.

Trusting that a temporary separation might induce a better understanding between them, the poor lady, with much reluctance and after repeated hesitations, at length resolved to pay a short visit to her own family, to many of whose members she was an utter stranger. The old had gradually sunk into their graves since she last sat beside the hearth of her paternal home. The laughing children, who had sported about her knees before her marriage, were men and women now; and a new generation had sprung up to fill their places.

The prospect of this long-delayed visit was not a cheerful one; but the heart-bowed

widow could no longer support the chilly atmosphere of her bereaved home; and she accordingly resolved to volunteer it. Her proposal was warmly and gratefully acknowledged. Down to the very babies, all were anxious to see and to love "dear aunt Willoughby;" and once more a feeling of returning happiness made her pulses beat with a less languid throbbing than they had done since the death of her husband.

Lady Willoughby had not been absent from the Hall above a few days when, to the amazement of the whole neighbourhood, an announcement appeared in the county paper that the estate was to be let on a seven-years' lease, and that immediate possession might be had, as the owner was about to travel on the Continent.

The old Hall readily found a tenant; and this was no sooner accomplished than Sir Lionel, with a brief letter of leave-taking to his forsaken mother, started for Paris, whence he proceeded to Vienna, and finally from Trieste to Italy. He was heard of, through his bankers, alternately at Florence, Rome, Venice, Genoa, and Naples: when he once more took wing for the East; visited Con-

stantinople and Egypt, and thence proceeded to Athens, where he lost his life in an encounter with brigands: whereupon, the fact being fully authenticated, Major Marmaduke Willoughby duly received intelligence at Madras of the melancholy and fatal event which had raised him, in his turn, to the baronetcy.

We have considered this retrospective sketch necessary, in order that the reader may be enabled fully to understand that, even proud as he was of his son, the nature of the present Baronet was not one likely to render him blindly indulgent to his errors, particularly where they involved so lavish an expenditure as to cause him some temporary inconvenience. As regarded his wife, the matter was, however, altogether different. She had married the stern old soldier for his title and his wealth; on both which accessories to the man himself she placed that undue value, which they universally command in the eyes of those who had never ventured to aspire to their possession; and although she soon discovered that a youth of bitterness and a manhood of blended hardship and authority had not tended to make Sir Marmaduke the most compliant of husbands, she bore her home-

trials meekly, satisfied that she had excited the envy of her less fortunate sister, and secured a good position in the world.

On her son she doated with the most blind affection; and marvellous were her visions of the future greatness to be achieved by his marriage. Peers' daughters and foreign duchesses were among the least of her speculations. Nothing, in short, was too wild for her maternal anticipations. And that Arthur, through whom all these glorious dreams were to be realised, should be thwarted or coerced, appeared to her so monstrous, that the imperious and wilful temperament of the boy had been suffered to develope itself, until every generous particle of his nature had been overlaid by selfishness, and that undue appreciation of himself and his own good qualities, which were as sure to lure him to ruin as the false light hung out by the wrecker to delude the storm-tossed vessel to destruction.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FAILURE.

"Don't talk to me, madam!" mumbled Sir Marmaduke, clutching the arms of his chair fiercely, and bending forward as if he were about to make a spring; "Arthur may be all that you say. Good looking! Of course he is, or he would not be my son. High-bred! What is there astonishing in that? Isn't he a Willoughby? All the Willoughbys have been good-looking and high-bred from generation to generation; it is a part of their inheritance. But I will tell you what they have never been until now—empty-headed and dissolute. Will the boy's good-looking face improve his morals? or his self-sufficiency pay his debts? I warned him on the last occasion for about the twentieth time, and he has thought proper to defy me. So be it.

Let him now get out of this new scrape as he can, for I will keep my word."

"But, Sir Marmaduke;" expostulated the pale and agitated mother; "the poor boy will be disgraced."

"He should have thought of that before."

"He is so young, my dear ——"

"He has been a man in the eye of the law for two years and nine months, and is therefore responsible for his own acts."

"But he has solemnly promised me that if you will only pay this money he will never gamble again."

"I won't trust him."

"But consider the family credit, Sir Marmaduke. This is a debt of honour."

"Let him try what the family credit will do for him in the way of paying it. Or, should you consider it a desirable expedient, you can sell your diamonds, and pay it for him;" growled her husband.

"You cannot surely be so ungenerous;" exclaimed the lady; "when you have so much money lying idle?"

"Money is never lying idle, Lady Wilmoughby;" said the Baronet tartly; "and,

moreover, I do not choose to be made a beggar in my old age."

"Then I can tell you what will happen ;" persisted his wife : "you will drive the poor boy into the hands of the Jews."

"I would not advise him to let me find him out in any transaction of the kind, and you will do well to tell him so ;" was the rejoinder ; "for I solemnly declare, that should I ever discover that he has speculated upon my death, he shall inherit barely what the law must award to him, but not one shilling of the money which I have been accumulating at considerable self-sacrifice ever since his birth, shall ever pass into his possession."

"You cannot be serious, Sir Marmaduke !"

"I never was more serious in my life. No, no, madam ; you may have made a fool of your son, but I am formed of sterner stuff, and will be no woman's puppet."

"You cannot conceive how penitent he is ;" said the mother, applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Oh yes, I can ;" was the dry retort ; "as penitent as the drunkard after a night's debauch, when he wakes the next morning with

an aching head and throbbing pulses ! Wondrously penitent ! Marvellously penitent ! And so he will continue to be until he has released himself from the consequences of his own ill-conduct."

"You have no other child, remember."

"True ; and to be candid with you, I am very glad of it. Now listen to me, Lady Willoughby. You know, or ought to know by this time, that I am not a man to be trifled with and set at nought ; so long as the boy committed only follies, I was weak enough to listen to your arguments (if arguments they could be called), and to overlook, or, at all events, to forgive his reckless extravagances ; but he has now taken another and a wider step on the road to ruin, and from folly has progressed to vice. Weak, I may have been, and have been, for I was fool enough to fancy that my indulgence would have produced some effect upon him. It has not ; and I will not countenance crime."

"Crime !"

"Yes ; I say it advisedly, crime : for was it not a crime to place himself in a position to win the money of another, fool or rogue, as the case might be, like himself, when he knew

that, should fortune prove unfavourable to him, he had not the means of acting like an honest man?"

"You argue like an usurer, Sir Marmaduke."

"And you like an idiot, Lady Willoughby. You have sneered more than once at the manner in which your sister had reared her daughter; how have you educated your son? Why, I would venture a year's income, that if this exemplary young gentleman should offer his hand to his cousin he would be bowed out of the house."

"This is too much!" exclaimed the lady indignantly; "and I am surprised ——"

"You are often surprised, my dear; but I mean what I say. And now, as I am really worn out by your pertinacity, I shall feel obliged by your changing the subject."

"Well, sir;" said his wife defiantly; "as you have no regard for the name you bear, I do not see that I am called upon to uphold it, and therefore the experiment shall be tried. Arthur's debt *must* be paid, and I know that he does not dislike Laura. Remember, however, that it is your own suggestion. Let him marry the merchant's daughter, if you compel

him to make such a sacrifice, but observe that I protest against it."

"Protest, my dear, protest;" was the rejoinder of the Baronet; "but really, after all, I do not see that the speculation will be a bad one. You know I was born to the baronetcy, and therefore I hold it rather cheaper than you do. The girl is pretty, good-tempered, and accomplished, and she is your niece; so that, as I before remarked, there is not much to be said."

"And you would consent to this to save a paltry fifteen hundred pounds?"

"It is not the money after all, Lady Willoughby;" said Sir Marmaduke, with a kindling eye; "had Arthur required fifteen hundred pounds for some worthy and laudable purpose, he should have had them, for he would have deserved them; but, let the consequence be what it may, I will not compromise my conscience by encouraging him in a career which can only terminate in ruin, and, worse still, in dishonour. I would rather disown him altogether than feel that I had lent a helping hand to his disgrace."

Lady Willoughby was silenced. Where were now the brilliant air-castles which she

had built up? Was she never to see a Lady Barbara, or an Italian Duchessa, ready to replace her as mistress of the Hall? As regarded the alternative proposed by Sir Marmaduke, she was well aware that it had been mentioned merely to annoy and mortify her, for the Willoughby diamonds were as much the objects of the family pride as the centenary oaks and elms on the estate, while her personal property in these precious heirlooms was limited to their use. What was to be done? Arthur had given his I O U for the money, and had rashly pledged himself that it should be paid within eight-and-forty hours. That the resolution of her husband, extreme as it might be, was nevertheless irrevocable, she understood him too well to doubt; while she was at the same time conscious (at such a moment, how painfully!) that his military principles led him to look with contempt and disgust upon everything equivocal in its tendency, or disreputable in its nature. On that side there was consequently no hope; and the time was so short, and the emergency so pressing, that in order to preserve the character of her son it was necessary that he should act promptly. She

declared the sturdy veteran to be unnatural and cruel, forgetting that the cruelty was actually on the part of Arthur, who had coldly exposed his parents to the necessity—as he had fondly flattered himself—of paying the penalty of his excesses.

The poor lady was in despair. In her inordinate love for her son, like many another weak mother, she had sowed the wind only to reap the whirlwind, and it had come at last. Arthur, scarcely entering into life, had wrecked himself at its very threshold, and must be saved by any means. And yet to permit, and actually to sanction his marriage with Mrs. Heathcote's daughter, the girl at whose pretensions she had sneered, and of whose wealth she had made a bitter mock, was a struggle almost beyond her strength; and the proud woman paused more than once to wipe away the tears wrung from her by mortification and wounded pride, before she regained sufficient self-command to report to her anxious son the ill-success of her application to his father.

“Why, the governor must be crazy!” was the dutiful comment of the wrong-headed young man, when he had heard her to an

end; "how can I show my face in society until this cursed money is paid? Well, he will only have himself to thank for what may happen. The fifteen hundred pounds I must and will have. So far I have steered clear of the Jews; but if he thinks proper to turn me over to their tender mercies, he must have his way."

"I suggested as much, my poor boy;" said his mother; "but he warned me, that if he detected you in any transaction with money-lenders, he would leave you barely what the law would award you at his death, and will away all his funded property elsewhere."

"Pshaw! a mere threat! The old fellow was in a rage; but it won't last, and he'll think better of it in an hour or two."

"Do not flatter yourself with any such hope, Arthur;" hastily exclaimed Lady Willoughby. "I know and understand your father thoroughly; and rely on my assurance that, let the consequences of your imprudence be what they may, he will not stretch out a finger to assist you."

"Then what is to be done?" was the agitated inquiry.

"I will tell you, Arthur; and you will believe me when I say, that no motive less powerful than my anxiety to preserve your reputation could induce me to make such a suggestion,—you must marry your cousin Laura; and you can, by making known the engagement between you, readily raise all the money that you may require, without involving your father's name in any way. It will be a frightful triumph for my purse-proud sister; but I will submit even to that humiliation to save you."

"Not a bad idea;" was the calm reply. "I don't at all dislike Laura; she is pretty and presentable, and I could like her as well, if not better, than any other girl I know. But what would the proud old Baronet say to this arrangement?"

"It was his original proposition;" said Lady Willoughby bitterly; "and he cannot consequently refuse to sanction it. And now, my dear boy, if you can really make up your mind to accept the hand of Laura, the sooner you offer yourself the better, in order to avoid any *esclandre*."

"Accept the hand of Laura! I would accept many things much more disagreeable

in my present dilemma ;” said Arthur complacently.

“ Well then, lose no time ;” was the maternal rejoinder ; “ in an hour you may arrange everything ; and when you return come to me in the library, and we will consult together on the next step to be taken in order to settle the other matter. But pray spare me all my odious sister’s ecstasies, for I am in no humour to brook them, and shall require all my self-command to bear up against the bitter disappointment to which I am condemned. I had hoped so much from you, Arthur, that I feel half heart-broken.”

“ But suppose Laura should refuse me ?”

“ Refuse you !” echoed his mother indignantly : “ you must be mad even to hint at such a thing. Refuse *you* ! No, no ; trust me, Mrs. Heathcote knows better than to allow that. Her only feeling will be one of exultation, for where could she expect to secure such a husband for her daughter ? They have succeeded in making the acquaintance of one man of rank, it is true ; but it is quite evident that he only tolerates them because the two girls have formed a sort of friendship for each other, and she will naturally be glad

to show him that her daughter has been fortunate enough to secure the only son and heir of a wealthy Baronet."

"I trust you may prove a true prophet;" was the somewhat doubtful response.

"Really, Arthur, you are too absurd!" said Lady Willoughby almost angrily. "Do you think that my sister can have forgotten, or will ever forgive, my social advantages? I know her better, and that she will never suffer such an opportunity of raising herself to my level in the person of Laura to escape her. And now put on your hat, and make the best of your way to Grosvenor Street and get the business settled, in order that you may have time to make the necessary arrangements for liquidating this detestable debt."

"Well, mother, I'm off; and as I don't altogether dislike the errand, I will do my utmost to realise your hopes."

"I confess that I feel no particular anxiety as to the result of your visit;" said his mother with considerable self-complacency; "but I shall, nevertheless, be glad to see you back again for many reasons."

As Arthur Willoughby left the house he experienced a sensation of bewilderment which

it required all his sense of self-appreciation to overcome. That he should be urged by his mother to ask the hand of his cousin under *any* circumstances, appeared to him so extraordinary, that he could scarcely reconcile the fact to himself; and, moreover, he had never hitherto believed that his indulgent old father would do more than resent for a few hours any shortcomings of which he might be guilty. He was an only son—an only child; and he had lightly and carelessly presumed upon this fact until he had deluded himself into the conviction that he enjoyed perfect impunity, and might set all parental rule at defiance. However, as we have before hinted, he had already had vague aspirations of his own, involving the possession of the fair Laura and her long-hoarded thousands, and was not by any means disposed to visit very heavily upon himself the error which had so opportunely afforded him the occasion of preferring his claim to both.

Mrs. Heathcote was at home and alone, busily engaged at her writing-table; but her greeting to her nephew was most cordial.

“I have intruded on you at a very unfashionable hour, my dear aunt;” he said, as

he took a seat near her; "but I know that you will forgive me when I state the object of my visit. I can endure the suspense to which I have hitherto condemned myself no longer. You cannot require to be told that I have loved my cousin Laura for years, and I am now come to ask your influence in my favour."

"I am sure that Laura has returned your regard, Arthur;" was the smiling response; "but love! you cannot be serious when you talk of love. What would your mother say when she heard that you had been rash enough to volunteer the contamination of a marriage with the daughter of a merchant?"

"Oh!" said the young man gaily; "I am supplied with all the proper credentials. I am duly authorised to make the proposal; and you may rest assured that I will do everything in my power to render my pretty Laura happy."

"I have no doubt of it; I am quite convinced of it;" acquiesced Mrs. Heathcote; "and it is therefore unfortunate that you should not have made up your mind to ask the hand of your cousin somewhat sooner."

"Surely we are both young enough, aunt,

even now, to take the cares of matrimony upon us?"

"Too young, Arthur; too young—at least you are;" was the exulting but cautious reply; "and I really wonder that Lady Willoughby should have consented to your volunteering to encounter those cares at so early an age. It is, however, very flattering both to Laura and myself that she should have done so; and at the same time very unfortunate, as my daughter is no longer in a position to spare you the mortification of a refusal."

"A refusal, aunt?"

"Yes, my dear Arthur, a refusal; for Laura is already engaged."

"Laura—engaged—and to whom?"

"To the Earl of Ravenswood! I had intended," pursued the lady, erecting her tall person into a perpendicularity which appeared to add several inches to her height; "to have kept her secret for the present; but, under existing circumstances, I feel it due to you to let you into the secret. In a few weeks she will be Countess of Ravenswood. Do me the favour to express to your mother my deep sense of the honour which she was willing to confer upon us, and to inform her at the

same time of the reasons which compel us to decline it."

"Then I am a lost man!" murmured Arthur Willoughby, for the first time realising the whole danger of his position.

"No, no; not so bad as that;" said his triumphant companion, with affected sympathy; "there is more than one attractive young lady in your exclusive set, who will no doubt be happy to accept that of which we are no longer free to avail ourselves. The future Sir Arthur Willoughby will be at no loss to console himself for a first disappointment."

"Oh, aunt, if you only knew——" faltered the young man, as he buried his face in his hands.

"Nay, nay; it is but the old story after all;" interrupted Mrs. Heathcote, with a tranquil self-complacency, almost maddening to contemplate; "but I really had no idea that you cared so much about Laura."

"I do love her—love her as truly as I am capable of loving anything, though not perhaps as she deserves to be loved;" exclaimed Willoughby impetuously; "and now, now when I feel that I have no hope on earth save

in you, will you promise me to believe this assurance before I tell you more?"

"Arthur, what can you mean?"

"Will you only say that you give me credit for the affection which I have long felt for my cousin? Will you admit that I have never failed in respect and regard for yourself, even when I have been reproached by your own sister for what she termed a want of self-respect? Will you believe that I am not utterly worthless, and that I looked forward to a marriage with Laura as the greatest happiness I could know in this life, if I confide to you the wretched position in which I am now placed by my own folly?"

"Speak on, my dear boy;" was the earnest reply, "and fear nothing."

The humbled young man told his tale frankly, fully, and without the slightest reservation; and Mrs. Heathcote at once comprehended the policy of her sister.

"Thank you, Arthur;" she said, as he concluded; "the enigma is now fully solved. I do not blame you in this unworthy transaction, for I am fully convinced that you love Laura; and I am even prepared to admit that

I felt satisfied months ago that, had it depended on yourself, you would have offered her your hand. I am, therefore, willing to exonerate you altogether, and to give you credit for having rejoiced at an opportunity of offering yourself to her acceptance. I cannot, however, refrain from expressing my opinion of the mean and unworthy conduct of Sir Marmaduke and Lady Willoughby, who, the one to save his money, and the other to screen the disgrace of her son, could coldly countenance such a violation of good faith and right feeling. Enough, however, on that subject. Your honour is in peril; and although I may resent their treachery and selfishness, I will not suffer my sister's son to lose his good name for a few paltry hundreds. Here, Arthur;" she continued, taking her check-book from a drawer in her *escrutoire*, and hastily filling up one of its pages; "here is what you require to redeem your honour. All I ask in return is that, should you be ever again tempted to ——"

"Never, aunt, never! I swear to you;" exclaimed the young man, ardently kissing the hand which was extended to him; "and

oh! I intreat of you to do me justice. Had I not loved Laura ——”

“ I quite understand your meaning, my poor boy;” said Mrs. Heathcote, overcome by his agitation; “ and had Laura loved you in return, however much she might have grieved over the cause of your difficulty, its effect would have been utterly unimportant. But these considerations are, as I have already explained, under existing circumstances, idle; and you must endeavour to forget all the events of to-day. You have just learnt a bitter lesson, of which you have sense enough to profit, or I shall be greatly mistaken in you. And now go; we have exhausted the subject of our interview, and shall, I hope, at our next meeting, find one more pleasant to us both. Say nothing to Laura of what has passed between us.”

“ And you will really keep my unworthy secret ?”

“ Faithfully.”

“ My good, my generous aunt ——”

“ Good morning, Arthur !”

In another moment he was gone. Humbled, but happy—sorrowing, but saved—with a truer appreciation of himself and his own errors than he had ever before felt.

Two days afterwards Mrs. Heathcote received a sealed packet, which reached her through a servant in the Willoughby livery. It contained her own check, with a cold acknowledgment from the Baronet.

CHAPTER XX.

A DEPARTURE.

As the period appointed for Lord Ravenswood's marriage approached the wretchedness of poor Marston increased, until his appearance became painfully changed, and at last attracted the attention, and excited the anxiety, of his guardian.

"Ferdinand;" he said on one occasion; "were I not so well acquainted with the moral energy of your character, I should be tempted to believe that the cares consequent on your recent accession to a fine fortune had proved too much for your philosophy. You are really looking extremely ill."

"I am afraid that I am *not* well;" was the reply; "and I was about to request your permission to run over to the Continent for a few weeks, in order to try the effect of change."

"My permission, my dear boy, cannot be needed in any case; but I confess that I shall feel your absence at this precise moment to be peculiarly unfortunate;" said the Earl. "Oblige me by seeing Dr. Holland; and should he decide that there is no immediate necessity for your departure, by at least deferring your expedition until after my marriage."

"I think I understood that it was your intention to start for Ravenswood Castle the same day;" replied Marston; "and, such being the case, as the event of the morning with all its splendid ceremonials would, I fear, prove too exciting for my present state of languor, I confess that I would rather pray for your happiness in a more tranquil manner."

"Well, well;" was the rejoinder of his companion; "we will hear what Dr. Holland has to say upon the subject. Do not decide hastily, as I cannot bear the idea of your leaving me just now. Come, put on your hat, and we will stroll down to Laurie's, and look at the park-phaeton which is to precede us to Ravenswood, and then on to Tattersall's to see if he has secured the cream-coloured ponies he mentioned to me. Leave

your cares behind in your carpet-bag; and forget for an hour or two that there are such beings as lawyers in the world."

Ferdinand silently complied; but the unusually high spirits of his guardian wore and wearied him; and he became more anxious than ever to escape a trial, which he felt to be beyond his strength.

On learning the intended marriage of Enna, to which he had at once, and with considerable satisfaction, given his consent, the Earl had suggested to Laura that she should induce her friend to give her hand to Carlyon at the same time and place — a request which she gladly and urgently urged, and which was eagerly seconded by the young man himself; but when Enna, in her turn, asked the sanction of her brother to this arrangement, he resolutely refused to permit it.

"You must be quite aware, my dear sister;" he said affectionately; "that I would not indulge in such a display of authority from caprice; and therefore, when I tell you that I have a strong personal objection to the scheme, simple as it may appear, I feel convinced that you will abandon it."

"Of course I will, Ferdinand, if you think

it right that I should do so;" replied Miss Greville, cheerfully; "only assure me of one thing, and that is, that your regard for Augustus is not diminished."

"Far from it, my dear girl. I shall be proud and happy to claim him as a brother; a fact of which he will become thoroughly aware when he ascertains the arrangements that I have made. I have a presentiment, Enna—nay, I am perfectly convinced—that I shall never marry. You see that we have now changed places in this strange and mysterious vortex, which we call Life; and, consequently, Carlyon and yourself will be my sole care and anxiety. You are admirably suited to each other; and I shall hope to pass many peaceful hours in your society. You have ever been most dear to me, my own little sister; and I feel that henceforward I shall love you even more fondly than I have hitherto done: but, meanwhile, I have mentioned to Lord Ravenswood my wish to pass a few months abroad."

"Abroad, Ferdinand! but surely not before this marriage has taken place?"

"Yes, dear, immediately. My mind has been so much harassed of late, that I fear my

health is giving way; and I know you well enough to be sure that you would not wish me to tax it still more heavily for the mere enjoyment of a bridal pageant."

Enna raised her eyes so suddenly to her brother's face that the bitter smile with which he had spoken was still quivering on his pale lips, and the truth became evident to her at once.

"You are right, quite right, Ferdinand;" she said hurriedly, as she strove to force back her tears. "You are looking ill, very ill, and you have already exerted yourself too much. How I wish that you would allow me to accompany you!"

"Impossible, my love!" was the hurried reply. "You could not desert your friend at such a moment, nor would it be respectful to the Earl. *My* absence will be an enforced one, while yours could only be attributed entirely to inclination. You, moreover, forget Carlyon, who might not, perhaps, approve of your enacting the *demoiselle errante* so short a time before your own marriage."

"No doubt you are right;" said Enna; "but suppose your health should not improve, and you should be lying on a sick-bed, alone,

and in a strange land, while I am at home surrounded by friends, and involved in pleasure? Oh, brother! brother!" she exclaimed impetuously, as she flung her arms about his neck and burst into an agony of tears; "it would break my heart!"

The poor girl was quite sincere as she uttered these words; but, unconsciously, she was also thankful for some pretext to give way to the emotion which was gradually overcoming all her efforts to suppress it; and she lay sobbing upon his shoulder as he soothed and consoled her with the assurance that, should he derive no benefit from the change, he would at once return to England and take up his abode for a time at Marston Court, until gradually she became more calm; for she felt a conviction that in expatriating himself for a season he was acting wisely and well.

All doubts of his love for Laura were at an end for ever; and yet she asked herself, how could that fact be reconciled with the anxiety which he had evinced to see her the wife of Lord Ravenswood? This was a problem that she could not solve. She knew nothing of the terrible secret of which he was the victim; and she felt her utter incapability

to explain a line of conduct which, as she sadly reflected, it appeared nevertheless equally impossible to justify.

The nature of Enna Greville was eminently trusting and affectionate, and even her love for Carlyon paled at times before her anxiety for her brother. But her position was an onerous one; she felt that to struggle against his will, as well as against external circumstances, ignorant as she was of the causes which had involved him in his present unhappy situation, was impossible. That Ferdinand could have brought this trial upon himself from any misconduct of his own, was so monstrous a thought, that she would instantly have spurned it should it ever have suggested itself. What, therefore, could it mean? for most assuredly, judging only from appearances, he had acted both cruelly and dishonourably. But no, no; of one thing at least she was quite certain,—that whatever might be the feelings of her deceived and outraged friend, those of her brother were no less poignant; and, consequently, be the mystery what it might, that he was “more sinned against than sinning.”

Fortunately for Ferdinand, the opinion of Dr. Holland, after a professional conversation

with his patient, was favourable to his wishes. Mr. Greville-Marston must not only, he declared, leave England and try the effect of a more genial climate, but he must do so without further delay, as the state of his health was most unsatisfactory, and betrayed, as he feared, incipient threatenings of consumption.

"His nerves have evidently been overtaxed, my lord;" he said, in reply to the earnest questioning of the Earl, when the young man had left the room. "His whole nervous system is disordered, and the action of his heart is far from being healthy. He requires change, rest, and gentle excitement, such as a total absence from his late course of disquiet, be it what it may, cannot fail to afford."

"It is altogether inexplicable to me;" exclaimed Lord Ravenswood; "as, far from having had to encounter any annoyance, he has lately come into possession of a fine fortune."

"Ha! over-excitement"—murmured the physician.

"I do not think so. His mind is too well regulated, and his nature too manly, for such weakness;" was the reply. "But do you

really think, my dear sir, that his *immediate* departure is imperative? I have particular reasons—very particular reasons—for wishing him to remain under my roof another month, if the delay would not involve danger ——”

“I fear that it would.”

“Then I have not another word to say; he must go, and go at once. I would not defer his journey for another day on any account. His life is far too precious, not only to myself, but to all who know him.”

“In that case, my lord;” said the skilful and kind-hearted practitioner; “you have come to a wise decision, for there is evidently no time to lose.”

The Earl buried his face in his hands, and, had he been a woman, he would have wept, for Ferdinand was as dear to him as a son, and those words of doom fell upon his ear like a death-knell!

Alas, alike for human science and for human penetration! how the heart, a mystery even to itself, mocks at both! Who can fathom the unfathomable? The fetters of the slave are visible, but the iron which has eaten into the soul is seen by no eye, not even by that of the sufferer. Our least and lightest

anguish is that which we can handle, discuss, and estimate at its actual amount.

It was decided that Marston should leave town within the week ; and while his anxious and disappointed guardian was superintending every imaginary arrangement for his comfort and convenience during his absence, and poor Enna was weeping over this her first separation from her idolised brother, Ferdinand himself was closeted day after day with the solicitor of the Earl, making such a final settlement of his newly-acquired fortune as must secure the worldly prosperity of those who were most dear to him.

He might never return. Who could say ? He was even more than half resolved that he would continue a wanderer for life. Why should he revisit England ? Why should he bring back a seared and blighted heart to sadden the happiness of a sister whom he fondly loved, and to reproach his benefactor ? What had he now to do with joy or gladness ? What was the future to him ? Like the far-off past, sterile and dishonoured ! The Alpha and Omega of his existence suited each other well ; his father's crime and his own duplicity made up his all of destiny. The

intervening period was a mere dream, a vision, an unreality, full of high aspirations, noble efforts, and glimpses of an Eden from which he was shut out for ever; and now that he had awakened from the delusion, he must forget it altogether: forget it, or degenerate into a fiend.

And meanwhile, day by day, the hectic deepened on his cheeks, his eye burnt with a fierce and glassy light, his step became unsteady, and his voice sharp and tremulous. It was, indeed, time that he should look his last upon those whose anxious glances and tear-fraught tones quickened the pulsations of his heart, and over-excited his weakened frame.

His destination was Bagnières, and the presumed period of his absence was six months.

In less than three weeks Laura would be the wife of Lord Ravenswood, and then ——

What then? There are none living now, who, like the prophets of old, are enabled to look into futurity.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BRIDE.

MISS HEATHCOTE had been Countess of Ravenswood an entire month, throughout the whole of which period she had struggled to persuade herself that she rejoiced over the absence of Marston—nay, that his very name was hateful to her; and yet, poor young creature! how anxiously she hung upon every word when he was the theme of her husband's conversation.

The noble pair had passed the time in solitude at Ravenswood Castle, while Enna had remained in town under the guardianship of Mrs. Heathcote, and the novelty and grandeur of everything about her had hitherto apparently amused and interested the girlish bride. But although the eye might wander delightedly over the objects about it, and the

voice testify to their beauty, the heart remained cold and untouched, save only by the filial affection and sincere respect which she felt for her husband.

The marriage had no sooner taken place than the Earl became more impressed than ever by a sense of its utter incompatibility. What had he done? What was to be the result of his selfishness and imprudence? How could a mere empty name repay the beautiful and girlish creature by his side for the sacrifice of all the brightest visions of her opening life? And what else could he offer in exchange for her youth, her beauty, and her wealth?

As these self-accusing inquiries rose in his mind, his determination slowly formed itself. "Poor child!" he murmured beneath his breath, as Laura, wearied with the length and the rapidity of the day's journey, had sunk into a deep sleep upon the cushions of the carriage; "Poor victim of a mother's ambition and a husband's heartlessness—for it *was* heartless to save myself by sacrificing you—I will struggle to do more than replace the parent you have lost. Henceforth you shall be to me as sacred as the flame guarded

by the Vestals ! I will be your friend and father, your counsellor and guide ; you shall not shed a tear which I will not wipe away ; you shall not form a wish that I will not seek to gratify ; you shall be the darling of my old age—the one pet lamb, dearer to me than all the flock beside. I will forget that we have stood side by side at the altar ; I will forget the holy vows which we simultaneously uttered ; I will remember nothing but that you are my cherished child ; the hope and stay of my declining years.”

And so had passed the month spent at Ravenswood Castle. The new Countess was still young enough to appreciate all the charm of novelty ; and she drove her cream-coloured ponies through the avenues of the park with a grace and skill which delighted her husband ; seconded all the zealous efforts of the Rector to ameliorate the condition of the poor, with an earnestness that convinced him of her sincerity ; won the goodwill of the tenants by the gracious urbanity of her manner ; and was declared by the few old retainers of the family, who still remembered the marriage of their late lord, to be as handsome, as dignified, and as generous as his bride, who had

been the daughter of the Duke of Broadlands. But, notwithstanding all these "golden opinions," the little heart was less joyous than it should have been: all looked so bright about this favoured child of fortune. She did not vaguely express a wish that was not eagerly fulfilled—look upon a face that did not meet her with a smile; and yet, what was it which made her yearn for solitude, even in her gayest and happiest moments?

It could not be the memory of Ferdinand? Oh, no! *that* she felt to be impossible: for what was Ferdinand to her? Was not the Earl all that was kind and affectionate? Yes! she was now able to understand all that she had lost when bereaved of a father's love at so early an age. It was so pleasant to be indulged in all her little graceful caprices, without one word of reproach or remonstrance; and to feel that a delicious sense of reliance upon a stronger head and a stronger heart than her own relieved her of all sense of personal responsibility. Of course she was happy, perfectly happy; but, from some cause or other, she soon wearied even of her happiness, and yearned for something to which she could give no name. There was an aching

void in her heart—a skeleton in the closet of her soul—a skull at the banquet of her content; and she did not dare to ask herself why it was so.

Alas ! Laura involuntarily, and almost unconsciously, still loved Ferdinand — the despised and detested Ferdinand, whom she had vowed to herself to expel for ever from her thoughts. Had he been within reach, she might perhaps have crushed him by her disdain, or humiliated him by her indifference: but he was absent, she knew not where; ill, she knew not how tended; alone, she knew not how penitent and miserable. She respected him no longer, for he had forfeited his plighted word, and he had wounded alike her heart and her vanity; therefore she considered herself privileged, and almost compelled, to hate him: and so, had she confided the cause of her secret uneasiness either to you, reader, or to myself, she would have declared that she did, and perhaps she would have believed herself to be sincere in making the assertion.

The “ honeymoon ” was over. Lord Ravenswood faintly proposed a short sojourn on the Continent, but the suggestion was so

hurriedly and earnestly negatived by his young wife that he did not repeat it.

"I thought that we might have seen what progress poor Ferdinand is making towards convalescence;" he said almost sadly; "for his letters are far from satisfactory; but as you are so anxious for the society of your mother and Enna, dearest, I will write to-day and urge them to join us here, unless you have formed some more agreeable project."

"Thank you!" was the reply, as she raised her head from his shoulder, and pressed her lips upon his forehead; "that is precisely what I should prefer. My dear mother will be so charmed with this noble old place; and as you tell me that Enna has never seen it, only imagine the delight with which I shall introduce them both to all its beauties! Besides, the foundation of my school-house is scarcely laid; and were I to run away from Ravenswood now, I should leave a host of duties unfulfilled."

"As you will, darling;" was the rejoinder of the Earl, while he gazed with admiration on the flushed cheek and gleaming eye of his girl-bride. "I, too, have many duties to fulfil at Ravenswood; and, after so many years of

enforced exile from my hereditary home, I shall rejoice to prove to those who are entitled to my care, that I have not forgotten their claim on my attention and indulgence."

We are sorry to be compelled to admit that the young Countess did not comprehend more of this affectionate compliance with her wishes than that she had, as usual, carried her point. Her thoughts had already wandered away, and a feeling of sadness had crept over her. Why did she refuse to leave England? What was England to her? Was not Ferdinand alone and sick, in a strange land? Were we not taught to forgive injuries, and to return good for evil? How dare she, fallible as she was, to take vengeance into her own hands? Had she not already been taught to feel that she was nothing to Mr. Greville-Marston? And should she not have pride enough to teach Mr. Greville-Marston, in his turn, that he was nothing to her beyond the ward of her husband?—aye, *her husband!*—that fact was enough. What could they now ever have in common? He was Enna's brother; and loving her as she did, she had acted ungenerously, for she had deprived the poor wanderer of the presence and support

of the Earl—that presence and that support to which she herself attached so high a value.

Poor little sophist! She did not, for one moment, recognise the lurking demon who was playing such wild antics in her inexperienced imagination; she did not see the shadow upon the wall, where the doom of earthly trial was one day to be traced.

Several more weeks were spent in the seclusion of Ravenswood, nor were they without their peculiar enjoyment to all parties. Laura wept with delight as she once more embraced her mother and her friend. Mrs. Heathcote trod with a lofty step and a proud eye the stately halls which she had restored to their legitimate owner; Enna was to be speedily followed by Carlyon; and the Earl was happy in the happiness of all about him. There was so much to be seen and admired by the guests, so much to be asked and answered, that the whole world beyond appeared to be ignored at Ravenswood, save one of its denizens. Need we say *that* one was Ferdinand? Amid all her own bright anticipations, Enna dwelt with constant and painful tenacity upon the solitary and unsolaced position of her dear and only brother;

Lord Ravenswood, self-reproachful, and anxious to hear himself justified by one whom he loved as a son, was pining to recall him, and yet dreading, from the tone of his letters, to make such a proposal ; while Mrs. Heathcote, amid all her triumph, could not overcome a vague suspicion that she was not altogether unconnected with the absence of the melancholy exile. Even Carlyon, engrossed as he appeared to be by the society of his promised bride, often found himself dwelling almost with irritation upon the inopportune expatriation of Greville, by which his marriage was indefinitely postponed ; and thus, after a time, a sense of weariness stole over the whole party, which ultimately induced Mrs. Heathcote to suggest a removal to town.

The season was about to commence. The young Countess was to be presented. There were a thousand arrangements which required her attention and supervision ; and, since the whole truth must be told, when she had once examined and exulted over the splendours of Ravenswood Castle, she was yearning to display her ennobled daughter to the admiration of the fashionable world of London.

Latterly, moreover, the health of Laura

had appeared to decline ; she was nervous and restless, and there was an unquiet glancing of the eye, and flushing of the cheek, which did not escape the notice of her mother.

" Tell me, and tell me frankly, Laura ;" she said on one occasion ; " are you happy ?"

" Perfectly happy, my dear mother. Why should you ask so strange a question ?"

" Simply because there is a tremor in your manner, and a want of interest in all about you, very unnatural under your circumstances ;" replied Mrs. Heathcote. " What can you desire that you do not possess ? Any young girl but yourself would be wild with happiness. Look at the splendour of your new home ; remember the high rank of your husband ——"

" Far less would have contented me ;" was the languid rejoinder.

" It cannot, surely be, that the apparently devoted affection of Lord Ravenswood is not sincere, and that in private ——"

" I do entreat, my dear mother, that you will discard every suspicion of the kind. The Earl is one of the best and noblest of men ;" eagerly exclaimed Laura.

" Then I must say that you are not only

unreasonable, but even ungrateful, that you do not accept in a different spirit the happiness I have secured for you ;" said Mrs. Heathcote with considerable asperity.

The poor young Countess answered only by a smothered sigh.

"Think of the mortification of Lady Willoughby ;" pursued the short-sighted and egotistical mother ; "the Baronet's wife, who did all in her power to crush us. Should you not be thankful that we can now crush her in our turn ? I should like to ascertain what she will say when she hears that the Duchess of Woburnville has consented to present you ! She will, at all events learn a bitter lesson, by which I trust that she may profit."

Alas ! not even the hope of mortifying her malignant aunt could bring a smile to the lip of Laura ; the Ravenswood diamonds, which were in the skilful hands of Hunt and Roskell, with sundry magnificent additions suggested and provided by her mother, were to her mere baubles ; the proud name, which fell on the maternal ear like a strain of witching music, had no harmony for her ; the present was a tedious pageantry, the future a blank. Her respect for Lord Ravenswood increased daily ;

to him she clung for protection and counsel ; and although she could not perchance have sympathised with wife-life sensibility in his joys, she was ever ready to share his anxieties and his cares. She even tried to believe that she loved him ; but that was a delusion : she felt towards him both gratitude and esteem ; but the young heart was already exhausted, the fresh stream was already tainted, and the overflowings of its turbid current were bitter as the waters of Marah.

The ice-crust had gathered upon the surface, but the lava-tide was boiling beneath, unseen and unguessed at.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE "INS" AND THE "OUTS."

THE presentation of the young, beautiful, and wealthy Countess of Ravenswood on her marriage, created, what is called in fashionable cant, "a sensation." A few titled dowagers, with very marriageable daughters to provide for, and a few more than marriageable belles, who had flirted and fluttered through their four or five seasons, and were beginning to comprehend that a ball or a rout *might* detain them occasionally too long from their beds, affected to sneer at the girl-bride, and to pity the infatuation of the "poor dear old Earl;" but, alas for their puny passions! the murmur was *vox clamantis in deserto*; it neither decreased the graciousness of royalty, nor the admiration of the courtly crowd. More than one titled and antiquated coxcomb, who had considered his youth far too precious to be

shared with any woman, felt a personal triumph in the marriage of Lord Ravenswood, as he gazed upon the pale and lovely girl who leant upon his arm after she had quitted the Presence, and received the warm congratulations of the stately but friendly Duchess, who had acted as her fashionable sponsor ; for why should *they* not in their turn achieve a similar conquest, and mate their grizzling locks and incipient rheumatism as brilliantly as he had done ? Shrewd fathers of families smiled grimly as they reflected that so dangerous a rival to their own establishment-seeking daughters as the beautiful heiress, had so soon been put "out of the market ;" while a host of younger sons, (or, in high-bred *argot*, "detrimentals,") rejoiced over the advent of so bright a star in their peculiar horizon, as they glanced from her jewel-cinctured brow to the time-lined forehead of her lord.

And so Laura made her way through the glittering throng, sparkling with diamonds, draped like a sylph in zephyr-like gauze and flowers, and clinging half-nervously to the support of her proud and exulting husband, to whom the Lady of the Land had vouchsafed a brief remark, which had brought the warm

blood to his cheeks, and deepened the bow with which he already bent before her.

Where was now the ridicule that he had so nervously anticipated? The breath of Majesty had dispersed it for ever.

"My lord;" had been the graceful murmur of the Queen; "I thank you for having added so bright an ornament to my court." And that flattering murmur was in another instant the theme of every tongue.

The progress of the noble couple was a slow one, for all present who could claim any acquaintanceship with the Earl crowded about him to solicit an introduction to his bride; and could Mrs. Heathcote only have witnessed that scene, she would have considered it cheaply bought by the happiness of a lifetime.

But the warmest greeting offered to Laura was that of Lady Willoughby. The excitement produced by her "niece, the young Countess," flushed her cheeks even through their rouge, and the family brilliants quivered upon her brow and bosom like the pendants of a chandelier. True, she had jested bitterly to her dear two hundred friends at the absurd pretensions of the merchant's daughter, and

had shed tears of rage as she ascertained that the heiress's hand and fortune had been refused to *her* son, when he had condescended to ask them in his necessity ; while he had, received in lieu thereof an alms, which she had induced Sir Marmaduke, incensed as he was, to return to the donor ; but she was too good a tactician to suffer such memories as these to cloud her brow, or to embitter her words, when she saw " dear Laura " the observed of all observers.

Poor Lady Willoughby ! She had been struggling ever since her marriage to escape from the fourth-rate circle of fashionable life, in order to take her place in the first ; and she was keenly conscious that, should her yearning ever be satisfied, it could only be through the medium of her right honourable niece. It is true that she had sundry disagreeable misgivings as to the manner in which the newly-made and noble bride might meet her affectionate advances, and the directions which she might have received from her hitherto despised mother in the event of such an emergency ; but Lady Willoughby was a woman of nerve, and had been elbowing her way through the world's crowd too many years to let the ball

of fortune bound past her without endeavouring to clutch it; and, after all, the Countess of Ravenswood *was* her niece, her own sister's child, and she had an undoubted right to exhibit her claim upon her affection. There was, consequently, no appearance of doubt or hesitation in her look or bearing as she advanced and seized the hand of her "sweet Laura," and expressed her delight at the unqualified success of her first public reception. Nothing could possibly have been better—nothing more satisfactory—save, indeed, that she must confess it would have been gratifying to her feelings, as her nearest relative, and one who had always loved her, to have been selected as her *chaperone* on the occasion. However, it was of course natural that, under all circumstances, she should yield the *pas* to a Duchess, and therefore she would not reproach her; but, as an earnest of her perfect acquiescence in the arrangement, would request her to present her to Her Grace before she left the palace, in order that she might tender her own thanks for the honour which she had conferred upon the family.

Laura was overcome by the torrent of words by which she was thus suddenly over-

whelmed, and could not answer a syllable ; but the Earl was more self-possessed.

"The Duchess, madam," he said coldly ; "has returned to the Presence ; and as she has her *entrée*, will in all probability not rejoin us. Moreover, Lady Ravenswood is somewhat fatigued, and I am about to ascertain whether it be possible to get up the carriage at once."

This was sufficiently discouraging, but the resolute lady was not to be so easily *mise hors du parti*, and she accordingly conceded, with a smile of affectionate sympathy, that the poor dear child *did* look rather pale, and might need rest. A first presentation was always a nervous affair : she remembered her own ; but it was wonderful how soon the feeling wore off. However, she would not detain her another instant—it would be selfish to do so, as she should make a point of being early at her door on the morrow, in order that they might quietly talk over the events of the day.

She did not, however, find an opportunity of lavishing her selfish tediousness upon her devoted victim for a "moon of days ;" as the door of the Earl's new mansion in Belgrave

Square was beset from the earliest hour at which it was possible with common decency to pay a first visit to the young Countess, until that in which gas-lights and carriage-lamps interdicted all intrusion on her privacy. She came and went, it is true; sent half-a-dozen dinner invitations, in which she had been forestalled; and even contrived to control her pride and to conceal her mortification sufficiently to drive to Grosvenor Street to offer her congratulations to her sister. Universal conciliation was her policy, or she should never be able to secure a footing within the charmed circle, on the confines of which she had so long hovered.

Brave as she was, however, there was a conscious something tugging at her heart as she prepared for the interview with her sister, which almost tempted her to forego her purpose: but no; cost what it might, it must be accomplished; and "if it were to be well done, 'twere well it were done quickly." So she smoothed her ruffled plumes and prepared herself for the encounter.

She had nothing to fear. Mrs. Heathcote received her with a calm cordiality which betrayed no shade of either triumph or re-

sentment. She had carried her point, and could afford to pity the humbled pride of her vanquished enemy. She had no wish to drag her at her chariot wheels. She was satisfied to feel that the moral vassalage was complete.

"You are very good—*very* good;" she said quietly; "to take so great an interest in Laura. It is naturally gratifying to me as her mother."

"You could not, surely, imagine that I should do otherwise!" was the energetic response. "Recent events must have sufficed to convince you of the fact."

"We will not refer to recent events;" was the unmoved rejoinder of the lady of the house. "It could not fail to prove unpleasant to us both."

"Not to me, I assure you, my dear sister;" hastily replied the indomitable Lady Willoughby; "as I am only too glad to find so excellent an opportunity of thanking you for the important kindness which you have rendered me: for since it was out of your power to bestow the hand of your daughter upon Arthur, you could not have served him more powerfully than by effecting, through your judicious offer of a gift (of which it was,

of course, impossible that Sir Marmaduke could sanction his acceptance!) a reconciliation with his father; of which, I confess, that I had previously despaired."

Mrs. Heathcote made no reply. The acknowledgment had been offered so ungraciously as to admit of none.

"Really, dear Laura's presentation was quite a triumph — quite an ovation;" continued her sister, affecting not to remark her silence; "and a noble friend of mine assured me in confidence, that he had been privately informed our young Countess would be a guest at the next state-ball."

"Lord Ravenswood has already received her Majesty's commands to that effect," said the triumphant mother, struggling to suppress her exultation.

"Already! Well, that is really delightful!" exclaimed her companion, with a slight quivering about the lips. "Laura is fortunate to have so early an opportunity of once more displaying the magnificent family diamonds."

"She wishes to avoid their display, as savouring too much of ostentation;" was the tranquil rejoinder; "in which I think that she

is wise; and as the Earl coincides in my opinion, I have secured for her the famous *parure* of pearls which Hunt and Roskell were about to send to Paris to be examined, and no doubt purchased, by the Princess Mathilde, who had seen a portion of the stones before they were mounted, and expressed her desire to possess them."

There was a momentary silence. Poor Lady Willoughby was stretched upon a moral rack. The Baronet of long descent had refused to disburse a few hundreds to save the honour of his only son, while the merchant's widow lavished as many thousands merely to gratify the vanity of her ennobled daughter; and that, too, as quietly as though such an act of profusion was of every-day occurrence, and that the substitution of a suit of pearls, originally destined for an Imperial princess, for jewels known to be heir-looms in the family of which she had become a member, were an act of modest self-abnegation for which she merited the utmost commendation.

At length the discomfited lady started a new subject.

"And now, my dear Arabella;" she said with a smile, which evidently cost her a se-

vere effort; "having thanked you, as I felt it both a duty and a pleasure to do, for your consideration towards my poor boy, I must also say that I have some cause of complaint against you."

"Indeed! I am not aware of ——"

"Nay, nay; do not seek to misunderstand me;" interposed Lady Willoughby with affected playfulness. "Was I not your sister? Almost your only relative? And should I not, in common courtesy, have been present at the marriage of your daughter?"

"After what had so recently taken place in my interview with Arthur;" said Mrs. Heathcote gravely; "I should have considered such a request as indelicate in the highest degree."

"Oh, believe me, Arabella;" was the rejoinder of the scheming dowager; "whatever the world may say to the contrary, I can both forget and forgive; and I assure you that my absence on the occasion caused considerable surprise, and elicited many unpleasant comments in very high circles."

"I am sorry for it;" said Mrs. Heathcote; "very sorry for it; but, under all circumstances, I cannot help thinking that you were

spared a great deal of annoyance: for it is never agreeable to be the only stranger in a crowd of persons, all more or less known to each other; and if I, as Laura's mother, in some degree felt this to be the case, I cannot hope that you would or could have been exempt from a far more painful consciousness of isolation than myself."

Lady Willoughby's eyes flashed fire; but fortunately it occurred to her at that trying moment, that she had at least one envenomed shaft still in her quiver, of which she could so skilfully dip the barb in honey, that the poison might be concealed while its effect was certain.

"I really grieved for you nevertheless, when I remembered that you could not witness your daughter's presentation;" she said, with a wonderfully well-got-up sigh, which was a great relief to herself in dispersing the suffocating sensation in her throat. "It would have been such a pleasure, particularly as you are still young and handsome enough to have commanded considerable admiration in your own person."

"As regarded my insignificant self;" replied her sister; "I cared little, for I have never been ambitious in my own person. I

have never been, what I believe is technically called, a "tuft-hunter;" and therefore I have no vanity to wound or to mortify. All my hopes, all my aspirations, have been for my child; and I am sufficiently repaid for the care and anxiety with which I have watched over her youth by the brilliant destiny which has succeeded, and rewarded, my maternal duties; and I can sincerely assure you that my heart was more gladdened, and my love more gratified, by the praises which were lavished on her high-breeding and graceful self-possession, than by all the admiration elicited by her personal beauty and the magnificence of her court-dress: while, as regards any notice which I might myself have elicited, you may believe me when I say that I have no inclination to exhibit the weakness of endeavouring to rival my own daughter. I have long since felt convinced, that when a woman is conscious that her empire is about to be wrested from her, she should not wait to be deposed; she should abdicate."

"No doubt, no doubt;" said her visitor, rising to depart before her temper overcame her patience; "and Laura is a sweet girl, a very sweet girl; both Sir Marmaduke and I

gave you substantial cause to feel convinced that we thought so before we were aware that she was about to become the wife of Lord Ravenswood. And now, good morning, my dear sister ; I can stay no longer, for I have taken you in my rounds, and shall not, I fear, get through half my list of calls to be made, and commissions to be executed. You really must come and take a quiet dinner with us — a humdrum family dinner, where we may talk about ourselves, and nothing but ourselves. Sir Marmaduke will be delighted, for you know he hates crowds. I am quite glad to have found you so well, for I really feared that you would feel very dull and lonely now that you are so thoroughly deprived of the society of your daughter."

"We meet every day ;" said Mrs. Heathcote ; but her visitor had at least the gratification as they parted to see that large cold tears, which she had found it impossible to repress, were swelling in her eyes ; while, anxious nevertheless not to betray that she had done so, she hastily took her leave.

"Home ;" shouted the footman, *doré sur toutes les coutures*, as the carriage drove off, and the "long list" of his mistress's morning

engagements fell in a shower of fragments on the carriage-rug.

It was well at that moment that Lady Willoughby had only a senseless shred of paper on which to wreak the bitterness of her wrath.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SUMMONS.

THE whirl of dissipation in which the young Countess of Ravenswood so suddenly found herself involved increased her irritation ; and a disgust of life and all its tinsel mockeries grew upon her, until every slight exertion became a fatigue, and every demand upon her mental or physical energies a positive infliction. It was, consequently, with a burst of tears that she received the official intelligence of her appointment to a distinguished position in the royal household ; and her evidently painful emotion so alarmed her husband, that he could no longer refrain from an entreaty that she would confide to him the cause of what he could not doubt must be some secret suffering.

Lord Ravenswood had outlived the age of romance, or he would at once have felt that

the present condition of his fair and fading wife could be attributed to no other cause than the heart-sickness of a betrayed and disappointed affection ; for no woman who possesses the two sovereign gifts of youth and beauty ever disdains such advantages, save when hope for the future is buried in the ashes of the past.

What could the poor girl reply to such a question ? She could but plead over-fatigue, over-excitement, the complete change of habits, pursuits, and interests by which she felt overwhelmed, and meekly intreat his indulgence for her weakness until she should be able to conquer it.

The anxiety of the Earl remained, nevertheless, undiminished. He remembered the Laura Heathcote of Grosvenor Street, all life and animation, entering into every project of pleasure with a *verve* and an enjoyment which spoke in every expressive feature ; and then followed the tardily-awakened consciousness that even at Ravenswood Castle, whence the world and the world's exactions were shut out, this languor and listlessness had gradually grown upon her. Poor Lord Ravenswood ! As his memory cruelly compelled him to ad-

mit the painful truth, he became once more a prey to the keenest remorse. Laura, he mentally argued, had already repented a marriage which he ought, despite all her assurances to the contrary, have known could entail upon her nothing but disappointment and regret : and yet, it might be that she was really ill, and that timely care and skill would restore buoyancy to her step and light to her eyes ; and oh, how earnestly he clung to this new-born hope !

The verdict of Sir James Clark, who, under the plea of paying his respects to his old friend and patient the Earl, was presented to his young bride, and who during his visit watched her narrowly without hazarding a question which could excite a suspicion in her mind that she was herself the object of his advent, followed Lord Ravenswood to his study at the close of the interview with a quiet smile upon his lips, by which he was almost reassured.

“ Am I right, Sir James ; ” he asked, as the door closed behind them ; “ in believing from the expression of your countenance that I have alarmed myself unnecessarily ? ”

“ Your lordship is perfectly justified in

arriving at that conclusion ;" was the reply. "There is nothing whatever to apprehend in the case of Lady Ravenswood."

An ejaculation of thankfulness broke from the lips of the Earl.

"On the contrary, my lord ; on the contrary ;" pursued the physician cheerfully ; "you must allow me to be the first to congratulate you on the seeming indisposition of your amiable Countess."

The heart of the Earl sank within him. He perfectly understood the misapprehension under which his companion was labouring, and at the same time felt the utter impossibility of undeceiving him.

"Her ladyship is young and delicate ;" followed up Sir James ; "and consequently a little nervous and excitable ; do not allow her to overfatigue herself, and all will go on most favourably, I have no doubt. At the close of the season I should recommend sea-air, and regular carriage-exercise. In a day or two I will repeat my visit, and meanwhile allow me to assure you that I shall only have my sincere congratulations to reiterate."

"But you admit, meanwhile, that Lady Ravenswood *is* nervous—that she is nervous

and excitable? Can you not prescribe something which may tend to her relief?" demanded the Earl, with an earnestness which the court-physician ascribed to the natural anxiousness of an elderly husband for a young wife, and at which he smiled accordingly.

"Red lavender, my dear lord ; red lavender, four or five times a-day, in doses of ten drops ; nothing more will be necessary. Good morning."

And Sir James bowed himself out.

Had the heart of Lady Ravenswood been at ease, nothing could be more brilliant than her position. Her noble mansion in Belgrave Square was decorated in a style of costly magnificence, which somewhat jarred upon the simple tastes of the Earl, but it had been prepared for their reception under the superintendence and at the expense of Mrs. Heathcote, who had presented it to her daughter as a marriage-gift ; and strikingly did it contrast in its plate-glass and gilding, marqueterie, boule, and gay-coloured satin draperies, with the antique and massive splendours of the stately old castle of which they had so lately been the occupants. Her horses and equipages were perhaps equalled, but certainly not

surpassed, by any in London. Her liveries were faultless, and her establishment princely ; while Enna, who had consented to remain her guest until the return of Marston to England, was her constant companion, and her fond mother her daily visitor. But truly might she have said with the desponding monarch,—

“ Man delights not me, nor woman either,”

for her comparatively happy hours were only those in which she heard Enna regret, the Earl deprecate, and Carlyon murmur at the absence of Ferdinand. It soothed her to hear his name uttered and his letters commented on in her presence, although he still pleaded the unsatisfactory state of his health in reply to the urgent intreaties of his guardian for his return. Of course she quite concurred with him in opinion that he was perfectly right to absent himself on any pretext that he could offer ; for, as she frequently assured herself, she should find it difficult, if not impossible, to exhibit towards him anything beyond the coldest courtesy. And what must be the result? *He* would believe her guilty of the meanness of presuming on her newly-acquired rank ; her husband would be hurt by her

want of cordiality towards his adopted son ; and poor Enna would perhaps even resent an apparently gratuitous and capricious unkindness, of which she should not dare to reveal the mystery.

Why was it then, that as she occasionally received the proud congratulations of the Earl on the modest elegance of her appearance when about to appear in public, and returned the admiring embrace of Enna, her heart did not respond to their tender flatteries, and that her ear missed another voice, and her eye another glance, which would have made it throb with delight? Alas! the poor young wife never ventured to ask herself a question which she could have answered only too readily.

Lady Willoughby, who had held her head several inches higher since she had become the aunt, not only of a Countess but of a Lady of Honour, was her constant guest ; but although the Earl, with his accustomed courtliness, had extended his hospitable invitations not only to old Sir Marmaduke, but also to his son, of whose tardy rivalry he was altogether ignorant, Arthur could not be induced to present himself in Belgrave Square.

Impetuous and selfish in all his feelings, he had no sooner cast away the consciousness of shame by which he was for a time beset, than he forthwith began to consider himself deeply aggrieved. He had been sacrificed to a title, when (as he readily convinced himself), had his young cousin only been permitted to follow the dictates of her own heart, he should have been the happy and envied possessor of herself and her fortune, instead of remaining as he was, the mere pensioner of a parsimonious and pragmatical father, who had brought the discipline of the camp into the home of his ancestors.

In the excess of his mortification and annoyance he became quite logical. A pretty wife, as he remarked to his *fidus Achates*, the Honourable Dick Slashaway, helped a fellow on in the world better than any exertion of his own. Look at —, and —, and —; would one have been created a Baronet, the other a K.C.B., or the third an Under Secretary of State, had he not been indebted to petticoat interest? Besides, what could a man do in the present day without money, and plenty of it? Expectations were all very well in their way, but they wore out a

fellow's patience; and to think that he might have been one of the richest commoners in England, had it not been for the confounded interference of that c——d Greville, who, not content with having come into a fine fortune himself, must needs force his pretty cousin to become a Countess, when she loved another man better—for that she did love him, Arthur Willoughby, a deuced deal better than the dilapidated old Earl they had persuaded her to marry, he knew right well.

“There is no hope of the lady now, at all events;” was the reply of his friend; “so if you are going to transform yourself into a sighing Strephon, do it like a man. Dock your patronymic of its ultimate syllable, and cry Willough! Willough! all the rest of your days. As to your other grievance, a liberal distribution of *post obits* would soon remedy that evil. You are a fine fellow, Arthur, in your way, but you want pluck; and you are no match for the old grenadier at home.”

“It would seem that I am no match for anybody;” said Willoughby sullenly; “and if Laura were not my own cousin, I would give my first year's income, when I get one,

to hear that she had taken the law into her own hands, and bolted."

"Bravo!" shouted his companion; "you are your own man yet. There is no fear that you will have recourse either to bowl or dagger—at least for love of the lady. So put a good face upon evil fortune, and *vogue la galère!*"

Meanwhile, the poor young wife, whose name had been so lightly banded from mouth to mouth by these two heartless and reckless profligates, was gradually sinking into an apparently hopeless state of inertness and despondency. She was irritable and restless no longer, but was evidently weighed down by a morbid melancholy, against which she had neither the strength nor the inclination to contend. Mrs. Heathcote was in despair, Lord Ravenswood half-maddened by self-accusation and alarm, and Enna wretched. Such a state of things was unendurable; and at length the Earl, who had no friendly bosom into which he could pour out his wretchedness, and wherein he could feel sure of sympathy, resolved no longer to request, but strenuously to urge, the return of Marston.

"That you can, should such be your will, at once emancipate yourself from my authority, Ferdinand," he wrote, "I am as well aware as yourself, for I have no legal control over you ; but I feel that you will not do this. You have ever been to me as a son, and I have endeavoured to perform towards you the duties of a father. The Countess is ill—I fear dangerously so ; I am miserable ; and Carlyon is complaining loudly of your disregard of his feelings. These are the circumstances under which I write, to enforce the necessity of your immediate return. You are, moreover, neglecting not only your own interests, but also those of your sister. If change of scene and climate could really have been beneficial to your health, their effect would have been visible months ago ; and believe me, that the life of foreign vagabondage which you are now leading can be good neither for your body nor your mind. Come back to us, my dear boy ; at such a moment we can ill spare you, and *I* least of all."

"Dearest !" said the Earl, bending over the sofa of his wife ; "I have at length made up my mind to enforce the return of Marston. The angelic patience of Enna, and the gene-

rous forbearance of Carlyon, must not be overtaxed; nor do I think that the young man is just to himself, in neglecting for so long a period the duties which have devolved upon him."

"But are you quite sure;" asked the young Countess, in a faltering voice which she in vain endeavoured to render steady—"are you quite sure that Mr. Greville-Marston will not resent this unexpected interference with his free will? Would it not be better to leave him to decide on his own movements?" And as she asked the question, Laura trembled lest, as was usually the case, her husband should adopt her opinion and forego his own.

"No, my dear child;" said Lord Ravenswood, delighted to perceive that the invalid exhibited a more lively interest in the subject under discussion than she had latterly evinced in anything; "Ferdinand possesses what our continental neighbours describe as 'a heart of gold.' I have told him that I have need of him—that we all have need of him; and I feel convinced that the assurance will suffice to restore him to us without loss of time. Until you became my wife, Laura, I loved nothing upon

earth as I loved Ferdinand Greville ; none know as I do the noble, the honourable, and the endearing qualities of his nature. Enna has been to me all that a gentle and loving daughter could be ; but her brother has been more to me even than a son—he has been a friend, a counsellor, a consoler ; a prop on which I have leant, without one fear that it would fail. You must love him for my sake, Laura, for he is very, very dear to me !”

The tortured girl hid her head in the bosom of her husband, and burst into a torrent of tears. It was well that she shed them at the instant, or they would have suffocated her. A wild feeling of delirious joy shook the whole frame of Lord Ravenswood. Could it be ? Did his beautiful young wife really love him to an extent which rendered her jealous of his affection for Ferdinand ? Had he been walking in darkness and “disquieting himself in vain,” when perfect happiness and self-respect were within his grasp, and awaiting his acceptance ? His brain whirled ; he forgot everything, save the overpowering emotion of the beautiful young creature who lay upon his breast, and whom he had vowed to love and cherish even until they were disunited by death.

“Speak, my best and dearest;” he murmured tenderly; “does my paternal affection for Ferdinand grieve or hurt you? Remember, dear child, that my attachment to my ward can never, and *shall* never, be permitted to lessen the love which I have vowed to you, and which you so richly merit; only say that you wish me to withhold my letter, and I will destroy it. You merit at my hands, Laura, anything and everything which it is in my power to accord.”

“Oh, no, no;” whispered the low, soft voice; “you know best: you are the best judge of the spirit in which your command will be received.”

“But your own wishes, dear one?”

“I have no wish, no care upon the subject. It will make Enna very happy, I know, to see her brother once more. Poor Enna! She ought not to be so perpetually disappointed. And you, Algernon; dear, good, indulgent Algernon, you too miss your chosen companion, your confidential friend. No, do not destroy your letter, do not delay it; I am weak and foolish; but believe me, I shall be happy in your happiness — Where are we going to-night?”

“To the Duchess of Woburnville’s ; but are you equal to the exertion ?”

“Oh, you see,” was the reply ; and none knew, none can ever guess, what an agony of struggle was involved in the smile which wreathed the lips of Laura as she answered the inquiry ; “you see that the rain has wept away the cloud ; and the summer sky is never more clear than when it has lightened itself by a shower.”

The letter was sent.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN ARRIVAL.

THE tonics of Sir James Clark began to operate most favourably on the constitution of Lady Ravenswood; the colour gradually returned to her cheeks, and the elasticity to her step; and, contrary to all the anticipations of the Earl, when the period of her service in the royal household arrived, she declared herself to be, with a little care, quite competent to encounter its fatigues.

It was in vain that both her husband and her physician attempted to dissuade her from the effort. Laura had reasons of her own for declining to comply with their advice. Ferdinand was returning—for she never for an instant doubted that he *would* return—and also that he would, in all probability, resume his place under his guardian's roof, at least for a time; and it was naturally her duty to avoid

him whenever she could do so without actual discourtesy. She was conscious of feeling too much pleasure in the idea of seeing him once more, to deceive herself into the belief that constant contact with the man whom she nevertheless professed in her heart to dislike and despise, would be altogether without danger to her peace of mind.

"No!" she inwardly argued; "my fate is now decided; I am a wife, and as such I must perform my duties well and worthily. I have now more than my own honour in trust, and I am weak to speculate thus even in thought. Did he not wilfully and unhesitatingly abandon me, and make a mock of my affections? Has he not braved and insulted me? Where is my pride? where is my sense of self-respect? Oh, let me be more true to myself! What now is Mr. Marston to me, or I to Mr. Marston? Nothing! worse than nothing! and I must teach myself to remember that my path through life is a plain one, which I volunteered to tread, and must follow to the end. Aye, to the end! Unloving and unloved, save as a petted child, a wayward girl, to be conciliated by toys and gewgaws, coaxed into smiles, and fed by flattery!"

And then she wept ; wept over herself ; and, for a time, despite all her efforts, ceased to remember that an angel, shorn of its wings, fallen from its sphere, and compelled to hide its uncinctured head in darkness, can alone shadow out the fate of a woman who, born to honour and consideration, is compelled either by her own weakness, or by the misconception of the many-tongued monster, Slander, to abdicate her position, and to accept the reprobation from whence she never can escape without the loss of all the brightest flowers of her coronet.

Not that she argued thus logically, far from it ; for then she would, doubtless, have shrunk back appalled from her own sin : her thoughts were more disjointed, her reflections more mingled and indistinct, and, like the figures in a magic-lantern, constantly varying from the terrible to the attractive. How differently might she have passed her existence had Ferdinand been true to her ! how fondly, how devotedly could she have loved him ! and then, how she hated him ! and how she despised herself for wasting another thought upon one who had proved a renegade from all the best and noblest feelings of the human heart !

In this vacillating and restless state of mind the frivolous activity and graceful exigences of a Court were wholesome for her, as they served to occupy alike her time and her attention ; nor could they, at her age, fail to possess a certain charm. The gracious kindness of which she was the object, the high position and still higher character of her husband, and her own perfect propriety of demeanour surrounded her with respect and deference, while her extreme loveliness and fascination at once established her on the pinnacle of fashion. She bore her honours meekly, however, for there was no empty shrine in her heart which she could dedicate to self-worship ; and so she passed on amid the courtly crowd, in it but not of it, the admiration and marvel of all around her.

On the very day succeeding that on which her services ceased at the palace, a travelling-carriage stopped at the door of Lord Ravenswood, from which Ferdinand slowly alighted, and desired to be conducted to the private apartment of the Earl. Uttering an exclamation of delight and welcome, Lord Ravenswood sprang from his seat, and folded the reclaimed truant to his heart. Nothing could exceed

his self-gratulation at the long-protracted return of his favourite; and it was not until a considerable time had elapsed that he sufficiently overcame his excitement to remark the altered appearance of the young traveller.

Thin, grave, and almost stern, the once gay and brilliant Ferdinand seemed to have aged whole years during the few months of his absence. It was evident that his continental sojourn had produced no beneficial effect either upon his bodily or mental health, and that the prescription of Dr. Holland had singularly failed. There was a visible effort in the cold smile with which he returned the enthusiastic greeting of his guardian. All his vivacity was gone; and he inquired after the Countess and his sister with as little emotion as though the question were merely one of simple courtesy.

Either really not perceiving, or affecting not to perceive the strangeness of his manner, Lord Ravenswood hastened to reply by the assurance that they were both in perfect health.

"Indeed! I am rejoiced to hear it;" was the composed rejoinder; "I thought I had understood her ladyship to be an invalid."

"And so I regret to say that she has been;" replied the Earl: "but all our fears are now at an end; and as the season is near its close, I trust that we shall have nothing to do but to prove to you, my dear boy, that the air of an English country-house will prove more efficacious than that which you have been breathing lately; for really, Ferdinand, you appear to me to be still wretchedly out of health."

"Have no apprehensions for me;" said Marston. "I probably look much worse than I really am; and to convince you that I feel this to be the case, I intend to devote the next two or three months entirely to business, for which purpose I shall be compelled to remain in town."

"Indeed you shall do nothing of the sort;" exclaimed his guardian; "here have you scarcely set your foot on English soil, and once more crossed my threshold, before you are meditating another separation. This is cruel to me, Ferdinand; very cruel: for you know not what your absence has cost me. No, no; when you weary of Ravenswood we will be your guests at Marston, but part from you again I will not. And, moreover, you

forget Enna and Carlyon, who have so patiently and uncomplainingly awaited your return; and, to be frank with you, I have set my heart on having a marriage at the castle: so that you see even we home-staying individuals have some important business on hand in which your presence is indispensable. And now I will detain you no longer from your sister, as the dinner will be served in another hour."

But if the Earl had been struck by the altered appearance and demeanour of Ferdinand, how much more painfully did it affect Miss Greville! She scarcely recognised her idolised brother in the cold, self-possessed, unimpassioned man who strained her to his breast for a moment, and then entered calmly into a conversation on her future prospects, and inquired into the nature of the arrangements upon which the Earl appeared to have decided. Fortunately for her fortitude the dressing-bell rang ere they had exhausted the subject, and Ferdinand withdrew to divest himself of his travelling costume.

"I see it all;" murmured Enna, as she flung herself upon a chair, in an agony of tears; "they have broken his heart! Not

a word of Laura—not a question—not a comment! My poor, poor Ferdinand!”

Contrary to the expectation of the Earl, who had anticipated that her late fatigue would have rendered Lady Ravenswood unequal to any exertion, she descended to the drawing-room radiant in beauty, and in a costume which would have graced the board of royalty. Her eyes swam in light, her fair cheek was faintly tinged with red, and her whole appearance forbade the most remote idea of indisposition.

As she entered the room her husband exultingly moved forward to meet her, and placing her hand in that of Marston, he said with emotion: “Now, indeed, I am perfectly happy, and have nothing more to ask of fate. With the two beings whom I most love on earth beneath my roof, and my sweet, gentle Enna to share my joy, I have not a single wish ungratified.”

“You are truly welcome, Mr. Marston—Ferdinand;” followed up the Countess, in a voice which slightly trembled, as she suffered her hand to remain in his; where, however, no gentle clasp sought to retain it. “Lord Ravenswood has missed you sadly, and you

“Speak, my best and dearest;” he murmured tenderly; “does my paternal affection for Ferdinand grieve or hurt you? Remember, dear child, that my attachment to my ward can never, and *shall* never, be permitted to lessen the love which I have vowed to you, and which you so richly merit; only say that you wish me to withhold my letter, and I will destroy it. You merit at my hands, Laura, anything and everything which it is in my power to accord.”

“Oh, no, no;” whispered the low, soft voice; “you know best: you are the best judge of the spirit in which your command will be received.”

“But your own wishes, dear one?”

“I have no wish, no care upon the subject. It will make Enna very happy, I know, to see her brother once more. Poor Enna! She ought not to be so perpetually disappointed. And you, Algernon; dear, good, indulgent Algernon, you too miss your chosen companion, your confidential friend. No, do not destroy your letter, do not delay it; I am weak and foolish; but believe me, I shall be happy in your happiness — Where are we going to-night?”

definite aim in life ;” replied Marston ; “ and, little ambition as I possess, I believe that should I ever enter the House, I shall become an earnest even if not an able politician.”

“ I shall, I feel convinced, live to see you both ;” said the Earl ; “ and as you have now a great stake in the country, you will be working for yourself as well as for the nation.”

During this short conversation Marston had never once raised his eyes to the face of the young Countess, who gradually grew pale and nervous, while a shade gathered upon her brow. What had she anticipated which had failed her ? What could it import to the wife of Lord Ravenswood whether the brother of her friend met her coldly or with smiles ? What could she gain by dwelling on the past ? How did she seek to include Marston in the future ! He was perfectly courteous, although calm, melancholy, and restrained in manner. Was it not desirable that thus he *should* be when they met again under such altered circumstances ? She could not deny the fact, but still she felt mortified and disappointed at his wonderful amount of self-control. Had her hold upon his heart been so very frail that he could emancipate himself in a few

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sullied the freshness of the new-blown flower, and she had learnt from the void within to say with the Preacher, "All is vanity."

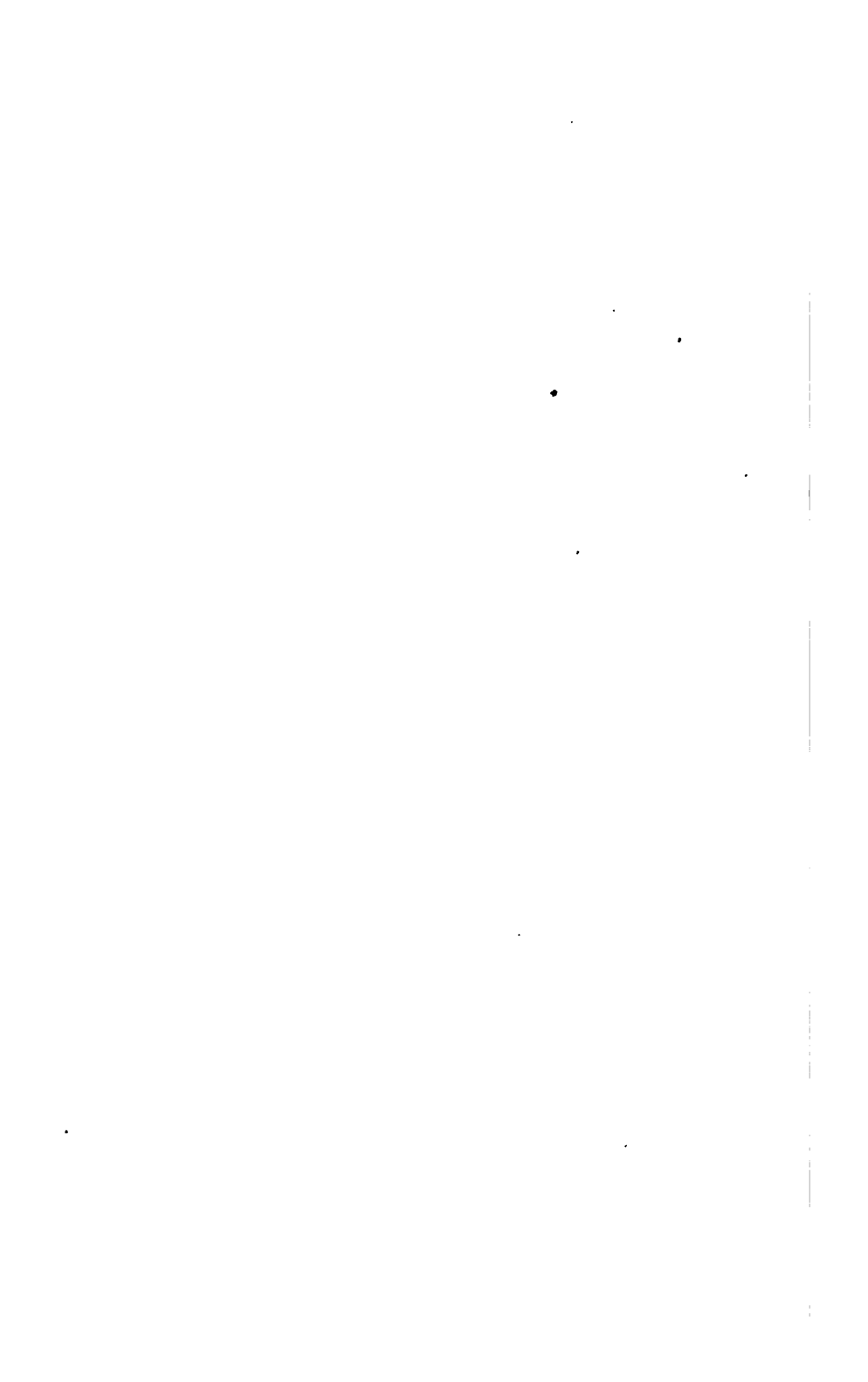
A luckless moment was this in which to meet once more the first and only idol of her heart. From the moment in which she had learned to anticipate his return she appeared to herself to be about to enter upon a new life. All seemed false and hollow about her, save the devoted tenderness of her husband and her own feeling towards him. But, after all, she asked herself, what was the real nature of the tenderness displayed by the Earl? Was it the offspring of such a love as that which she had pined since her girlhood to inspire? No, it was simply compounded of gratitude, a species of paternal and protecting pride, and an almost unconscious compassion for the beautiful young being sacrificed to his own exigences and the ambition of a worldly mother. What, moreover, was her own feeling towards the man to whom she had, as he fondly believed, voluntarily given herself? It was simply and entirely one of profound respect for his character, and of admiration of his many great and estimable qualities: but love—but passion—

oh, no ! Not as she had dreamed of, and had experienced these. She knew that she was but a petted plaything, tenderly handled, and delicately guarded indeed ; but not the familiar friend and counsellor, not the refuge in doubt or the resource in difficulty which she had pictured to herself that a wife ought to be ; not the " helpmeet," for which Providence itself had designed her. There was a wide and impassable gulf between her ignorance, and inexperience, and frivolity, and the astuteness, deepthoughtedness, and far-reaching prescience of her lord. His world could never be her world, save upon the surface. He had said well and truly before their marriage that for him the mere realities of life alone remained, and that its poetry was over ; that the volume was closed, and its covers clasped for ever ; while for her the page was still lying open uninscribed, and ready to bear such characters as she should herself trace upon it. He had said well and truly : for what could now ruffle the exhausted sensibilities of the one who had tested the subtle emotions of existence, and outlived all save the more tranquil and self-controlled ; or still the wild impulses of the other, who had begun to awaken to the fact

that she had weakly flung from her all chance of earthly happiness; and, grasping at a shadow, had for ever lost the real and tangible substance? Had she, moreover, even grasped at that shadow? No! — once more, no! She had *not* — that poor fallacy was in its turn denied to her; she had not outstretched a hand, but had suffered herself supinely and passively to be bartered like a bale of merchandise by the stronger will of her mother. And now, what remained to her?

What remains to any woman who has wilfully or weakly wrecked her peace? A life of soul-struggle, which, to be effectual, must be silent and unsolaced; or an existence of remorse and guilt, for which the world has neither sympathy nor tolerance.

END OF VOL. I.



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